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SCIENCE-FICTION

AUGUST

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THE GIRL IN TUBE 14 by Dick Purcell

An Exciting Novelette of Future Science

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THEY WRITE...

DICK PURCELL

When Howard Browne asked for a short biography, my hat size went up a little and I was happy to oblige. Understand Mr. Browne is searching for new authors and am grateful that he found me—or that I send my labor of love to *Fantastic*.

The dope? I'm twenty-four years old, unmarried, quite lazy, and very smart. Up to a few days ago I'd have sworn I was pretty stupid, but a sale to Ziff-Davis changes all that. A second sale will put me in the genius class.

Perhaps a drawback will be lack of education. Never got much. This, through my own fault, not that of my despairing parents who tried desperately to keep me in school more than two days in succession. I am self-educated if *Treasure Island*, *She*, all the *Tarzan* and Mars books of Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *the Three Musketeers* and dozens of other adventure books can be called educating.

Can't qualify as a writer if suffering is required. Never managed to suffer much. In fact I never cared for suffering and avoided it as much as possible.

My father owns a restaurant in Manhattan and always figured that I should take over after I came out of service. Came out of service, but never took over. While he and my dear mother planned my future, I reclined on the couch and rested. I had all the qualifications of a juvenile delinquent except the energy to go out and do something bad.

So I rested, and every time they agreed upon a path of endeavor for me, I got off the couch and went to the corner drug store.

Don't know exactly why I started writing—or trying to write. Know why I'm doing it now. Money. But in the beginning, there was no reason I can think of.

Maybe—Oops! Mom and Pop are at it again. They've decided I'd make a good novelist, so I'll be off to the drug store. But wait a minute. That's what I want to be, so I'll let them think it was their idea.

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right then and there.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to *finish high school.*

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it *fast* or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. *Here, it said,* is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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CONTENTS

THE GIRL IN TUBE 14
By Dick Purcell 6

COME TUESDAY
By Winston Marks 40

OCCUPATION FORCE
By Frank Herbert 53

THE SMASHERS
By Paul W. Fairman 58

HE RAN ALL THE WAY
By Milton Lesser 96

DEPARTMENTS

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID
By The Editor 5

ACCORDING TO YOU
By The Readers 118

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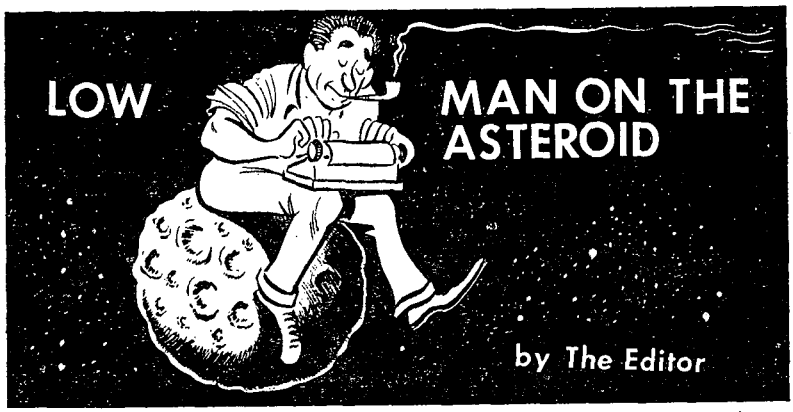

In this column last month your editor made the following statement: "Ray Bradbury is the only truly gifted author to come out of science fiction."

Judging from the response to that single line, your editor would have come off much better if he'd picked on American motherhood or Abraham Lincoln. Letters started coming in immediately after the issue went on sale . . . scores of letters which picked that one off-the-cuff remark for lengthy comment. Such salutations as "Dear Chowderhead," "Dear Stupid," "Dear Editor (ha, ha!)," etc., were common. The shortest of these declarations of war said, "You're nuts!"—the longest to date ran five single-spaced pages on what appeared to be asbestos, and which certainly should have been to support the language used. It was hinted darkly that the editor's forebears did not believe in marriage, that his morals were questionable at best, and that he had stopped reading after a short course in Mother Goose. Almost all the letters named one or more science-fiction writers who, it was claimed, were as good as, or better than, Ray Bradbury would ever be. The list included Ted Sturgeon, Robert Heinlein, Richard Matheson, H. L. Gold, Isaac Asimov—even (honest!) A. Conan Doyle.

Fine writers all—and not one of them as gifted as Bradbury. And that, of course, brings us sharply to the interpretation of the word "gifted." To your editor, "gifted" does *not* mean an ability to come up with unusual plots or startling extrapolation of known science or strong characterization or

(Concluded on page 129)

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THE GIRL IN TUBE 14

By DICK PURCELL

He was just a high-school kid; nothing on his mind but maybe taking a swim or going fishing. Then this naked girl walked in and sat down beside him — and he almost lost his life!

THERE was only one way to figure it that morning in Maynard's Drug Store. I'd flipped my lid. I'd flipped it but good. No other answer seemed to fill the bill.

I was sitting at the counter around ten, having a quick coke and trying to make up my mind how to kill Saturday, when she came in. There were several ways to spend the day. I could have gone out to the country club and done some caddying. I could have gone swimming at the lake, or even done some fishing.

But as I said, before I made up my mind she came in. She couldn't have been more than

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Nobody saw her but me—and I saw plenty!

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eighteen or nineteen and was very pretty and had an out-of-this-world figure thrown in. Her hair was a kind of reddish brown and her eyes were gray.

There were other things about her, too: the bewildered look on her face as though she'd never seen a drug store before and was all tied up in the wonder of it. All that, and just one more thing.

She didn't have a stitch of clothing on.

I sat there on the stool and gaped like a fool, thinking that a thing like this just couldn't happen in a little town like Ridgefield. It just couldn't. Then I wondered why I'd narrowed it down to just Ridgefield. I doubted that it could happen in any bigger place either. Even in Times Square, New York it would certainly cause something of a stir.

She walked in slowly, with no modesty at all, and got on a stool one down from me. I gulped and looked at Ziggy Frane, the kid who jerks sodas for Mr. Maynard on Saturdays. Ziggy was polishing spoons and paying no attention to the girl at all.

I gaped at *him* for a minute and then said, "Well, for cripes sake!"

He smiled vacantly and went on with his work. "What's wrong with you?"

"Well, for—good gosh! Of all the—"

Ziggy put down the spoon he was cleaning. "What's wrong, Art?"

"For lord's sake! Don't you see—it?"

He looked around amiably. "See what?"

"The—the—" I turned and forced myself to look at the girl, who hadn't moved and was sitting with her elbows braced on the counter and her chin in her hands looking blank and bewildered.

"Her," I said, pointing with my shoulder.

Ziggy looked at her. In fact, he looked right through her and out the front window. Where?"

"There. She's — she's not dressed!"

Ziggy's eyes brightened. "No fooling!" and he ran to the window and began peering up and down the street. After a minute he turned back with a silly grin on his face and said, "Some joke, Art."

"There on the stool, you fool!"

The girl wasn't paying much attention. She'd discovered the root beer tank fastened to the counter and was touching it with her finger and looking at the syrup

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through the glass. Then she looked over at the Coke in my glass and seemed to be associating the two in her mind. It was creepy in a way. A grownup girl reminding you of a baby getting its first association idea.

Ziggy had looked again and was still grinning. "As I said before, Art—some joke."

I got a little scared. I took a deep breath and leaned forward very earnestly. I said, "Listen, Ziggy. No fooling now. Seriously. Don't you see a girl without—well, a girl sitting on that stool?"

Ziggy said, "Art, for cripes sake! Will you finish your drink and go? I got to get some work done or old Maynard'll fire me and I need this job."

There was no use going into it any further. If it had been anything else sitting there, I'd have followed up and probably ended by hanging one on Ziggy for clowning with me. But when he looked the last time, I *knew* he hadn't seen her. No matter how good an actor he was, Ziggy couldn't have kept it up with a naked girl sitting there. He'd have bugged his eyes and looked, brother! I mean he would have!

So I got really scared. I was seeing undressed women sitting on stools beside me. I wondered if it was something I'd eaten. I figured back to the day before and tried to remember. Three hot dogs and two root beers at the luncheonette after school. Roast beef for supper with Boston cream pie and ice cream. Then a hamburger and a dog and three bottles of pop at the bowling alley and another piece of pie after I got back home.

Nothing wrong there. Just normal eating.

I looked again and the girl was gone. I breathed a sigh of relief. Just a momentary optical illusion. Everything was going to be all right, I told myself.

Then everything went haywire again because I caught the chick in the corner of my eye as she moved into range of my vision again. She'd just gone across the store to look at the perfume counter and was now heading for the door.

I almost yelled, *Hey! Don't go out there in the street without your clothes on.* But I couldn't get the words out of my mouth and then the door closed and she was gone. I jumped up and ran to the window to watch the excitement she'd be bound to stir up, and to see if Constable

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Williams was around to arrest her.

Constable Williams was there, but he didn't arrest her. He was walking up the street swinging his club and looking at the bright summer morning; looking so hard, he was unable to see that beautiful creature walk right by him in the altogether.

No one else was able to see her either. Old Mrs. Spain was crossing the street with her market basket over her arm and she kept right on coming, even though the girl practically brushed her elbow as she passed.

That did it! Beyond all doubt, I'd flipped my lid! I walked back to the counter and gropped for my Coke. Ziggy looked at me and said, "What's wrong, Art. You sick?"

I gave him a weak grin and said, "Yeah. You said it. Shot to hell."

"What's wrong? Where's the trouble?"

"In my head I guess. I wasn't kidding you about a girl sitting there with no clothes on. I really saw her."

I guess Ziggy half believed me, because he looked kind of envious and said, "Gosh! Maybe it's your carnal subconscious showing through. Either that or you ought to get your glasses changed. Was she pretty?"

"A pip," I mumbled. "A real slick chick," and got off my stool and headed for the door.

The last thing I heard Ziggy say was, "Blast it. Some guys have all the luck."

I went out to the country club and caddied. I worked for six hours and had a pretty bad time because I couldn't keep my mind on the game.

Second time around, I got Doc Starns. He's a crotchety old cuss anyhow, and when I lost his ball the second time, he yelled. "Lad, if you've got bad eyes, why don't you say so and take up some less exacting work?"

Hugo Baylor, who was playing with him, and winning, grinned and said, "Don't be hard on him, Doc. He's no doubt got a girl on his mind."

Hugo didn't know how right he was.

I went to the movies with Mike Hennesy, my buddy, that night, but I didn't tell him anything about what had happened at the drug store, and by Monday morning, I'd managed to pretty well forget the incident. I made it my business to forget it. And somehow, I was pretty sure it wouldn't happen again.

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My first class was math, that Monday. I like math, and it took my mind off my troubles except that I had to sit next to Lorrie Carder. Lorrie is a cute chick, all right; stacked to perfection and cute as a button. But she's a pest and she's got a crush on me and there seems to be very little I can do about it except dodge her.

Mike's told me more than once that I'm crazy for brushing her off. But she bores me, and that's that. When I met her in math, she put that rosebud pout on her lips and said, "Arty—where were you all the time last weekend? I called and—"

"I know you called. I was busy."

"I wouldn't think a boy would be too busy to talk on the phone to his girl once in awhile."

"Maybe a guy with a girl wouldn't, but I haven't got a girl, so that makes me different."

She laughed and took my arm and I had to tolerate her while we walked back to our seats and I could shove her into hers across the aisle. She said, "You're so funny some times. Of course you've got a girl and I'm it—or her—or she—"

"You aren't any of them. And now don't bother me. I've got some science to bone up on before next class."

Lorrie was quiet for a while. I heard her giggling to herself but I didn't pay any attention. Then, just before the bell rang, she leaned over and whispered, "Arty. Is it true that I've got a rival?"

I scowled at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I heard there's a very nice looking girl you meet in the drug store."

"What—what girl?"

"The one who doesn't wear any clothes."

If she'd been a boy I'd have slugged her right then and there. But she wasn't a boy and the bell rang just then and everybody began trooping to their seats. I just gave her a deadly look while she kept on giggling, and planned what I'd do to Ziggy for letting that story out. I'd pulverize that kid but very good!

Math went like a breeze and when the period was over and we headed for Science, there was Lorrie hanging on my arm again. In the hall, we bumped into Sam Taylor, the big red head. He grinned at Lorrie and said, "How about the barn dance with me tomorrow night, chick?"

She stuck her nose in the

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air and said, "Blow, Joe—no go!"

We walked on past and heard him mutter. "Some jerks have all the luck."

He meant me of course, but I couldn't see it his way at all.

For science, we had the new prof—Mr. Dickstein. He was some kind of a very brilliant European who'd come over on leave from a school in the Balkans somewhere — I wasn't sure which country, and knew his business very well. While he couldn't play in the same league with Furmi, he could have at least polished the big guy's shoes. He had a peculiar accent, but once you got onto it, he wasn't hard to follow, and he made science very interesting.

I'd never spoken to him personally — that is, really talked with him, so I was plenty surprised when he called to me as I was leaving the room after the period was over. I tried to shake Lorrie, but I'd have needed a crowbar, she hung on so tight, so I went to his desk and said, "You wanted to see me, Professor?" wondering what had been wrong with my work.

He looked at me sharply through very bright blue eyes for a moment and asked, "Arthur, could you drop over to my house tonight for a few minutes? I have something to talk to you about."

That almost floored me. I knew my work wasn't that bad and even if it was, you don't go to the prof's houses at night to catch up. I said, "Why, sure—I guess. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"No time to go into it now, except you are the boy who had that—" He stopped and looked at Lorrie and seemed a trifle embarrassed. "—that interesting experience in the drug store Saturday?"

Holy cow! Ziggy had certainly spread it around! Man, how I'd pulverize that jerk when I got my hands on him. I said, "Well—yes, I guess—"

He held out a hand. "I wonder if you would be so kind as to let me have a look at your glasses?"

My face turned red. This was a rib if I'd ever seen one. But what does a guy do? When a prof ribs you there isn't much you *can* do but stand and take it. I lifted my glasses off and handed them to him and Lorrie let out a giggle. Professor Dickstein jerked his eyes up and gave her a quick look; a look I couldn't figure out. He seemed honestly surprised at her for doing such a thing. Then he began studying my glasses,

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and either he was a hell of a good actor, or he was honestly interested in them. He pursed his lips and blinked his eyes and held the glasses up and squinted through them at the window. He said, "Hmmm, very interesting, but I'm afraid we must pursue this further." He handed the glasses back. "Can you be at my house at eight-thirty, shall we say?"

"I guess I can."

He gave me a quick beaming smile and said, "Fine," and then seemed to forget I existed as he turned back to some notes on his desk.

Out in the hall, Lorrie said, "Well for heaven sakes! What do you think that was all about?"

"How do I know? I guess he just wants me to come to his house tonight."

"But why?"

"To measure me for new glasses, maybe."

"He asked about you and the drug store."

"What about me and the drug store?"

"You know very well. Ziggy told it. The story's all over the school. They'll be kidding you about it."

"They'd better not," I said. "Anyhow, I'm going with you tonight."

"You're not going to do anything of the kind."

"You'll need me."

"For what?"

"Well — well, to lead you around by the hand while the Prof has your glasses."

"First, what makes you think the Prof's going to get my glasses? And second, who says I have to be lead around by the hand just because I haven't got them on? Do you think I'm blind or something?"

Lorrie looked at me with that little frown that puts a crease between her eyes. "Blind? Brother, that's no name for it. Not half strong enough."

After school, I met Mike and we walked home together. I said, "Mike, Professor Dickstein wants—"

He said, "Hold it, Art. Something else, first. What's this I hear all over school that you've gone bats and started seeing stripped chicks?"

"Well, it's—"

"Oh, so there is something to it, huh? And you don't say anything to me about it—me, your best friend."

"Maybe a guy would rather his best friends didn't hear about a thing like this."

"No kidding—what did you see?"

I told him, and while he was

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thinking it over, I went on and gave him the gook about Prof Dickstein stopping me and looking at my glasses and pegging me for eight-thirty at his house.

Mike took it all in and didn't say anything. That's what I liked about him. He wasn't the kind to blow off his trap about something before he'd given it the old gray matter treatment to see how it added up. I waited while he put it through the mental meat-grinder and then asked, "Well, what kind of hamburger do you get?"

"Mostly gristle."

"That was how I scored it —all blurred."

"Maybe he thinks you need new glasses."

"What is he, an oculist?"

"Nobody knows quite what he is. There's been chatter about him since he came to town and took that seedy old Ricker mansion."

"I've heard it."

"Hear the one about the tin man?"

"What tin man?"

"Some kid said he was passing the house one night and saw what looked like the Tin Woodman out of the Wizard of Oz walking past the window inside."

"What kid said that?"

"I don't know. Those things get around. After a while you can't find out."

"Probably some kid sounding off."

"Listen, how about me going with you tonight?"

I thought it over. "Can't see anything wrong with that, I guess.

"He didn't ask me, but if I walk in with you he can't throw me out."

"And maybe we can get a chance to look around for the Tin Woodman."

"Could be. What time did you say?"

"Eight-thirty."

"Okay, I'll meet you at the drug store at a quarter after eight and we'll go from there."

"It's a deal."

I went on home feeling better. Having old Mike along would help a lot.

The Ricker mansion had been vacant for five years before Professor Dickstein came to town and rented it. It was a weird old pile but plenty solid, the main reason for no one wanting it being the size. You'd have needed a family of twenty-five kids and seven dogs to maintain contact in the place. No one knew how many rooms it had, or how many turrets sticking up from the roof. One time I counted

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five on one side of the place alone.

Mike and I met at the drug store and had a Pepsi to stiffen our spines and then hit for the Ricker place. There was a big iron fence around it with the gate on Maple Street. It was standing open and we walked in and up a long winding drive toward the house.

Mike said, "I wonder what Dickstein wanted of a joint this size? He's got no family. Not even a wife."

"Well, there's the Tin Woodman."

Mike laughed but his voice sounded so lonesome in all those trees that he stopped quick. He said, "This layout is strictly from Boris Karloff. Next time, tell the Prof you'll meet him at the corner of Main and Pine at high noon and then only if the sun's shining."

We came to the big front porch and climbed the stairs. There was no button to press and we looked around and finally found a knob in the middle of the front door. I tried to turn it but it wouldn't give.

"Maybe you pull it out," Mike said.

You did. I pulled the thing and such an unearthly clatter broke out inside that we both jumped back.

Mike said, "Gosh! He must have had fifty tin pans piled up in there."

"You aren't kidding," I said, and then the porch and the hall inside lighted up like a ball room and the door opened and there was Professor Dickstein squinting at us and smiling with all his back teeth showing.

"Come in, Arthur, come right in. Don't mind the bell. This is a large house and I have a loud one so I can hear it wherever I am."

"That's all right," I said. "I brought a friend of mine to—to kind of keep me company on the way over."

"A good idea. Come inside, both of you."

We went in and he closed the door and then we followed him up a flight of stairs to the second floor. Inside, the place looked a lot more cheerful than its reputation because everywhere, it was brightly lighted. The hall, the stairway, the second floor hall, and the rooms we could see into as we passed them, were all brilliantly lit. It was as though the Professor were giving a ball and expected the place to be filled.

I glanced at Mike and saw that he was scowling. That meant something was on his mind and I wondered what it was. Then Professor Dick-

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stein turned into a room and motioned us to follow.

"I wonder if you would mind waiting here a moment or two. I'm right in the middle of an experiment that I've got to finish. Won't take long."

He ducked out and left Mike and me staring around the room. There was nothing creepy about it. Light blazed from neons in the ceiling and there were homey chairs and a sofa and several pictures around on the tables. I wandered around and looked at the pictures while Mike scowled at the lights.

Finally I said, "Look, you got something on your mind. Spill it."

"That's right. An odd thing about this place. Haven't you noticed it?"

"I've noticed he must have a whale of an electric bill." Just as I said that, I noticed something else, too; something that made my skin tighten.

But I didn't have time to say anything about it, because Professor Dickstein came bustling back into the room just then. He evidently heard my remark, because he smiled and said, "Oh, no. I don't even have an account with the light company."

"Then you keep your own generator," Mike said sounding doubtful.

"After a manner of speaking. And cheap, too. Atomic power is very inexpensive after your reactor starts functioning."

He spoke so casually, that I only had time to think, *Good gosh! Atomic power!* But no time to say anything because he cut in with, "And now I've kept you boys waiting too long already. Come with me, please."

He walked out of the room and down the hall with us trailing after and turned into what appeared to be a laboratory of some kind, although I couldn't identify any of the shining equipment that stood around. There were the usual tables and benches of course, and one thing that really puzzled me: a tall glass tube as high as a man and thick enough to hold one, which seemed to be filled with some sort of fluid, although there was a kind of haze around it. Not exactly a haze, maybe, but did you ever wake up suddenly and open your eyes and have them blur on you before you could focus them?

Well, that was how it was with that big glass tube. When you looked at it, your

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eyes blurred and you couldn't see it very well.

Dickstein sat down behind a small desk and pondered for a moment. Then he smiled and said, "I'm glad you brought your friend along. It will enable me to make some tests I couldn't make otherwise."

"What kind of tests?" Mike asked sharply.

"Oh, nothing difficult. I just want you boys to tell me what you see in this room." He pointed at Mike. "You first. Just look around and tell me what is in here."

Mike shrugged. "Well, the desk and chair you're using—two tables in the middle of the room—work benches running along both walls there—a window with heavy drapes in the far wall—" Mike stopped and frowned at the window, seeming to have momentarily forgotten the Professor.

He was jerked back. "Yes—yes. What else?"

"Well, there's some scientific equipment on the benches but I don't know the names—"

"Never mind the names. Now—what else?"

Mike looked around blankly. "Why, that's all, I guess."

Dickstein now turned to me. "All right, Arthur. Tell me what you see. If you see everything Michael mentioned, you don't have to bother repeating them. Just tell me if you see anything else?"

"Sure. That big glass tube in the middle of the room. I don't see how Mike overlooked it."

Mike frowned. "What glass tube? I don't see any glass tube! What are you talking about?"

"Amazing!" Dickstein cried, and he jumped up and came around the desk and before I could move, he'd snatched off my glasses. "Now! Can you still see the tank?"

Mike had been right. It *was* amazing. The tank was gone. There was nothing but a blank space where it had been. I shook my head. "It's a pretty good trick," I mumbled. "You must do it with lights."

"After a manner of speaking," he said. "Tell me—are your eyes very bad?"

"No. I'm just a little nearsighted, and what with studying, my folks decided I ought to wear them."

"That accounts for the tint," he said, peering at the lenses. "Calculated to rest your eyes in a very bright light."

I stood there wondering a lot of things, one of them being what had happened to the glass tank—another, why he

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was so interested in my glasses.

He said, "If you'll give me a moment. I just want to check these lenses for error."

He crossed the room and sat down in front of some complicated looking equipment and began giving my glasses the business. He put some fluid on one lens with an eyedropper and then wiped the fluid off with a Kleenex and dropped the Kleenex into a pan of water or something that looked like water.

But I guess it wasn't, because it turned bright green and he almost jumped off his stool. He sat down again and sort of crooned to himself from excitement—like a puppy when you hold a piece of food just out of reach—and began scribbling some equations on a pad.

Next, he began shooting rays of light through the lenses and studied the result. After about ten minutes, he got off the stool and came over and handed the glasses back to me. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you very much."

"Is there anything wrong with Art's specs?" Mike asked.

"Oh, no. Not with that particular pair. All glasses with that particular shading are—well, very interesting in relation to some experiments I'm making. I'm sure there aren't many pairs in town like them."

"These are the only ones, I think. I got them from Doc Brainard and he said they were something new. That was about a month ago. He may have sold some since then."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference, now that I've seen yours. They—"

I'd just put the glasses back on and now I did a double take. And neither the Professor nor Mike could have missed it because I saw the naked girl standing there by the glass tube and I almost fell over the desk.

"What's the matter?" Dickstein asked sharply.

I pointed. "The same girl—the one I saw—"

He reached over and snatched off my glasses. "Calm yourself, Arthur. You're overwrought!"

I looked at him and a kind of chill went through me as I realized there were several Dicksteins. There was the crisp, pleasant Prof we knew at school who knew his subject from top to bottom and joked with the kids sometimes. Then there was the completely absorbed scientist

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we'd seen at the bench examining my glasses—a man of Science with a capital S.

And now I was seeing another one, a cold, hard man with a pair of the cruelest, most magnetic eyes I'd ever seen.

He touched my arm. "Come with me a moment, Arthur." He started leading me toward a door, then paused to look over his shoulder. "You'll pardon us for a moment, Michael."

He didn't ask Mike—he told him — and Mike just stood there.

Dickstein took me in a small room and said, "Sit there." I sat. He pulled a chair around in front of me and sat down and looked straight into my eyes and I couldn't have moved if the joint had caught fire.

He said, "How old are you, Arthur?"

"Eighteen."

"That's a very dangerous age, my boy."

"Dangerous?"

"Volatile, you might say. A boy of eighteen tends to walk a tightrope in this world so full of tensions. Now, the things you thought you saw—the unclothed girl—the glass tank — were illusions, pure and simple."

"Illusions?"

"Yes. I planted the illusion of the glass tank in your mind myself as a part of an experiment I'm working on."

"What about the girl?"

"Who knows where she came from — what part of your mind constructed her? It really doesn't matter. The thing to remember is that both images were illusions. Remember that—believe it—and they will never reappear."

"But will other ones pop up?"

"No. When you recognize them for what they are, they vanish forever."

His eyes were on mine, holding mine like a bug on a pin. He went on talking. Maybe I answered—maybe I didn't—but after a few more minutes, I knew he was right. Illusions, and I was damned lucky having him around to point it out to me.

After a while, we got up and went back into the laboratory where Mike was waiting, and Dickstein was again the genial, pleasant teacher hobnobbing with a couple of his deadheads. He said, "You boys will have to drop in on me again. I'll let you know."

Mike said, "Professor, there's a rumor around school that you've got the Tin Woodman in here."

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"The Tin Woodman? I don't understand?"

"Well, an iron man—a robot, maybe—or maybe just someone's imagination. Just thought I'd mention it for laughs."

Professor Dickstein was startled, but only for a second. He recovered instantly and laughed. "Of course, but I don't know how anyone found out about it. A robot I'm working on, but I thought it was my secret."

"Somebody claimed they saw it through a window, moving about."

Professor Dickstein glanced up quickly, and I knew there was a meaning behind Mike's words that I missed, but that the Professor hadn't missed it. "Impossible," he said. "I haven't gotten around to energizing the thing as yet. Would you like to see it?"

Without waiting for an answer he started down the stairs and we followed. He led us back through the main floor hall and opened a door. We looked in. It was a large closet, and inside stood a big metal thing with arms and legs and a funny looking box for a head. But no lights or action of any kind.

"Merely a framework," Dickstein said. "I work on it in my sparetime. And now, I suppose you boys will have to be getting home."

He was right, and the sooner we started, the better I was going to like it. . . .

As we walked down the street, Mike said, "I didn't get a chance to tell you what I noticed."

"What was it?"

"All those lights."

"I saw them too."

"Yeah? Well, now look back at the house."

I looked. It was big, and ugly—and completely black. I said, "Well bust me for a square! How come I overlooked a thing like that?"

"You had other things on your mind. Me — I checked while he had you in that other room and what do you think I found?"

"What?"

"Heavy shutters on every window I could find. Obviously, he's got them on every window in the place."

"Why would he go to all that trouble?"

"And he evidently put them on recently."

That startled me. "How do you know?"

"Because that kid who saw the Tin Woodman through a window. There's a robot in there, so we'll have to take it for granted the kid did see it,

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so the windows weren't shuttered when that happened."

"Maybe he opens them in the day time."

"I don't think so. They looked solid to me."

"What do you think's behind it?"

"I've got an idea about the guy. I think he's up to something he wants to keep secret."

I nodded. "Something criminal?"

"Not necessarily, but he doesn't want people snooping around."

"Then why did he ask me to go there?"

"That's the point. He's a scientist first and there was something he wanted to find out about you and your glasses and the things you've been seeing and he couldn't resist the temptation to get you out here."

"Uh-huh. Those things I've been seeing—"

"Yeah?"

"They're just hallucinations. They weren't there at all."

"That, I can believe. There certainly wasn't any undraped chick in Maynard's drug store."

"Nor any glass tube in that room."

"I didn't see it anyhow," Mike said, grumpily.

"What do you think we ought to do?"

He thought it over a minute and said, "Nothing, I guess. What is there to do?"

"Just keep our mouths shut?"

"I guess so. He seems to be a decent enough joe."

I wished I was as sure as Mike that we should keep our mouths shut. There was something else I'd seen too, but I didn't want to talk about it just then. I wanted to think about it a while. I went to bed when I got home and hardly got any sleep at all from thinking about it.

By morning I'd made up my mind what I wanted to do—what I figured I had to do.

Burgle the school.

It wasn't exactly legal, in fact it wasn't at all legal, but I salved my conscience by telling myself I wasn't going to take anything or wreck any property.

I had to wait until Saturday, of course, and got over there around eight in the morning. There were several kids there already, flipping baskets down in the gym. I watched them a while and then slipped up to the second floor unnoticed and tried the principal's office.

It was locked, but I'd ex-

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pected that. I went back down into the basement and eased my way into the girls' locker room. This was the touchiest part of the whole business. If I'd been caught in there, I might have been labeled as a sex maniac or something, so I was mighty careful.

I went through into a little room beyond where the scrub women changed their clothes and found what I was looking for in one of the lockers.

The keys they used to get into the rooms.

I hid this under my jacket and went back upstairs and was in the principal's office in nothing flat. Now the hard work came. I had to get into the drawer of his file marked *Personnel*. The file was locked but I got the blade of my knife under the lock and opened it without scratching it hardly at all.

I shuffled through the drawer until I found the envelope with the name *Dickstein* on it. Then I did some fast reading. I didn't bother much with his degrees and how he'd gotten them. I was willing to concede him those. I was interested in his personal life.

According to the report, he'd had a pretty hard time with the Nazis and then with the Commies. He's been heaved into concentration camps and had done forced labor before he escaped and found his way to the United States.

The report said he was a bachelor, had never married and had no close relatives.

Now I had what I'd wanted and I closed the file and got the keys back into the room behind the girls' locker room and got out of the school building very quietly.

When I got back to town, I went to Maynard's drug store. I turned a dollar into small change and went into the phone booth and looked in the Central City directory.

Central City is about fifteen miles from Ridgefield. It's the only big town for quite a distance around and the only place I could find what I wanted.

I found the number and asked the operator for it and after a couple of rings the receiver at the other end was lifted and a man said, "Carney—Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"My—my name is Arthur Fleming. I live in Ridgefield."

"Yes?" The voice was pleasant and polite.

"There's something—somebody out here I think you maybe ought to know about."

"I see."

He waited for me to go on.

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"It's something I can hardly talk about over the phone."

"Perhaps we could send an agent to your home."

"No—no, I don't think that would work either. Could I come and see you? I could ride over on the interurban and be there in less than an hour."

"Of course. The office is open until four today. If you come later than that, we'll have to make special arrangements."

"Oh, I can make it before that, all right. I'll start now."

"Very well, I'll be here."

He was polite and a little reserved, as though he hadn't been convinced of anything. But why should he? Probably crackpots are calling the FBI every hour of the day. I hung up and went out and got on the interurban car that was waiting; I got on wondering if I could be classed as a crackpot.

Sam Carney was a young, broadshouldered man with very little hair. One of those guys who lose it early, but on him, somehow, it looked good. I guess at the FBI they double in brass because he was sitting at the switchboard when I got there, although it was very quiet with no calls coming in. As I entered the office, he got up from the board and smiled and held out his hand. "Everybody's left but me," he said. "The graveyard shift. Come in and sit down."

He set the board so it would ring automatically and put away a copy of some digest magazine he was reading and led me into a small office. I sat down and we looked at each other.

Finally, he said, "Let me see now—you said your name is Arthur Fleming and that you live in Ridgefield."

"That's right."

"And you couldn't talk over the phone."

"Uh-huh. It's about—well, it's—"

"Why don't you start at the beginning and go straight through it?"

"If I told you all of it, I'm afraid you'd call me nuts."

"I doubt it, but let's find out."

So I started out with what had happened in the drug store. I think he was a little surprised, but he hid everything but the slightest smile and kept on listening. Then I got to the part about Professor Dickstein wanting me to come to his house.

Here he said, "Just a minute please," and got up and went out. I heard some file drawers opening and closing and then he came back and

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sat down again. "Pardon the interruption. You can go ahead now."

I told him all that happened in the Prof's house, being very careful to try and remember everything and tell it straight.

When I got to the place Mike and I left and went home, I stopped for breath and he evidently thought the story was finished. He said, "Very interesting. And what do you think we ought to do about it?" He spoke as though he didn't figure the FBI belonged in the picture, but was willing to be convinced.

I said, "That's not quite all of it. I told you about looking at the pictures in that room while we were waiting for the Professor. Well, one of them was of the Prof himself and a woman and a girl about seventeen. There are two points that interested me about that, and you'll have to take my word for the first one."

"What is it?"

The girl I saw in the drug store and in that laboratory, were the same girl I saw in that picture."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure—yes. Of course, the girl was only a hallucination — Professor Dickstein convinced me of that — but why should my hallucination be solid enough to have her picture taken with the Professor?"

Sam Carney pondered. He didn't appear to be studying me closely, but I knew he was. He said, "Of course, the girl had all her clothes on in the picture?"

I nodded. "You probably don't believe half of this, and I can hardly blame you."

If I expected him to protest that he did, I was in for a disappointment. He studied me directly for a moment, and said, "We always try to keep an open mind on things. You mentioned a second point."

"Uh-huh. About the picture. When you look at anything, you usually get a quick feeling of what it is—I do anyhow—and when I saw that group, I just *knew* what it was—the Professor and his wife and daughter. It was one of those hunches you're just sure about."

"Perhaps in your case — yes. In ours, it's a little different. We have to keep an eye on facts, also."

"Sure, and — well, I know for certain Professor Dickstein claims to be a bachelor —never to have married."

He took his time thinking that over before he asked, "How did you find that out?"

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There was no use stopping where I was—I'd said too much for that. "Because I sneaked into the school files and checked his record in the envelope they have there."

There was a very long silence after that and I began wondering whether he was going to have further comment on illegal entry.

But he didn't. He said, "You're right about Professor Dickstein's dossier indicating him to be a bachelor, so your hunch about the picture is probably wrong."

"What about the girl in the picture being my hallucination?"

"There isn't much I can say about that one way or the other. To tell the truth, it's a little out of my range."

He got suddenly to his feet and held out his hand, so I did the same. He said, "Thanks very much for coming over, and I wonder if I might make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Drop this thing where it is. Forget about it, don't do any more dangerous things like going through files without authorization. Just leave it in our hands."

"I'll be glad to," I said. "From now on, you've got the ball and welcome to it."

His smile was genial now. "We'll do our best to carry it. See you around, fellow. . . ."

I rode home feeling sure he had charged the whole thing off to my big fat imagination. I was sure he didn't believe me about seeing the naked girl and if he didn't believe that, how could he believe anything else? I decided to take his advice and forget about the whole affair, and I sure hoped the girl didn't show up again.

Or did I? As the interurban rolled toward Ridgefield, I thought about her. It was pleasant thinking about her. I did it all the way home. . . .

Things went smoothly for the next week. I didn't have any more hallucinations and began to think the whole affair had passed into yesterday. Professor Dickstein was his old pleasant self again; handling the kids, keeping them interested, teaching them a lot no other man would have been able to get across to a class.

He never mentioned the incident at his house again, but I caught him looking at me once in a while in a penetrating, amused way, and I wondered how I could have pegged him for anything but what he was. A smart Prof and a good joe. I remembered

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what he'd said about electricity being cheap when it came from atomic power and wondered if he'd been kidding or whether he really had a way of doing it in the Ricker mansion.

If he had, it was okay with me. I wasn't going back to find out.

Or at least, I thought I wasn't.

I'd been deliberately paying more attention to Lorrie, figuring she was a lot healthier to have on my mind than a naked chick who walked into drug stores that way. And Lorrie was the kind of a kid who bloomed under attention.

I hadn't realized how pretty she really was until now, and when the guys would grunt, "lucky dog" when we passed, or something like that, I realized they were right. A chick like Lorrie didn't come down the road every day.

So everything was fine until somebody suggested a treasure hunt at this party she gave. A treasure hunt goes this way. Somebody is appointed to think up any number of crazy things, like a hair off the sheriff's left eyebrow or a spark plug out of a Model-T Ford or an egg from old Mrs. Kennedy's chicken coop—she's got a Great Dane hound to guard it—and things like that. The things are written on slips of paper and everybody draws one out of a hat.

The one I got read. *A pair of socks worn by a genuine, c a r d - carrying Communist.* That really put me over a barrel because I didn't know any Communists, card-carrying or not. I'd be a cinch to have to pay the forfeit, which would be decided by a committee of winners after the game.

Lorrie drew hers and gave it a kind of funny look when she read it and I walked over and asked her what it was. She said, "The nut off a bolt in the body of the Tin Woodman seen in Professor Dickstein's house."

I said, "Holly cats! That's one you're not going after!"

Lorrie grinned. "You just watch me."

"You can't do it. That place is dangerous."

"You're imagining things. Anyhow, I'm going in there and see if there really is a Tin Woodman."

"There is. I saw it."

This surprised her. "Arty! You didn't tell me that."

"I didn't tell anybody, but that isn't the point. You—"

Mike wandered over with his slip. "What did you two gooks draw?" We told him

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and he showed us his: six jelly beans—all different colors. But he was more interested in Lorrie's slip. He looked at me and said, "We can't let her go in there."

"I told her she couldn't."

Lorrie flared up beautifully. "Listen, you two—this is my assignment, not yours, and I'm going through with it!"

Mike looked at me and shrugged. "What can you do with a woman?"

"Nothing, I guess, but we can't let her go alone."

"Okay. We'll work as a group."

We started for Professor Dickstein's house and Mike said, "Do you know any communists?"

"Hell no."

"Then how you going to get their socks?"

"You've got me, chum. Just go around asking people, I guess."

"All you'll pick up is a punch in the nose."

"Uh-huh. Looks pretty rugged. Even if I find a guy who admits he'd a Red, how am I going to get him to part with his socks?"

"You just find one," Mike said grimly, "then we'll see about the rest of it."

We walked up the dark street with Lorrie between us and finally came to the old Ricker mansion. Lorrie shivered a little and said, "I guess no one's home."

"Because there aren't any lights?" Mike said. "Don't let that fool you. You never saw so many lights in your life as he's got in there."

"Then why aren't the windows bright?"

I said. "Let's ring the bell and tell Professor Dickstein what we want. Then, if he won't give it to us, we'll forget the whole thing."

"Good idea," Mike said.

But Lorrie thought otherwise. She was a little scared, I think, but she had courage. "Not on your life!"

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't fair. You aren't supposed to get your things that way."

"But this joint is locked up like a fort. There's no way we can get in except ring the bell."

Lorrie was getting excited now. She giggled, "We can try can't we?"

"I suppose so, I said, glumly. "Let's get going."

We went around the place twice before Mike found a small door that seemed loose. It was right near the ground. "Looks like a coal chute," he said.

"Wait a minute!" I yelped.

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"We can't crawl into a coal hole. We'll ruin our clothes."

"We can always wash them," Lorrie said. "Try the door, Mike."

Mike tested it with his shoulder, but he couldn't get any weight into it so close to the ground. He got up and kicked it twice and whatever was holding it on the inside, gave away and it opened.

"Well," Mike whispered. "Who's first?"

Nobody spoke up. Mike sighed and got down and pushed himself through the opening, feet first. We watched him until only his head showed. Then he said, "Well, here's nothing," and disappeared.

We waited and then heard a sound that seemed to come from a long way down.

I said, "Well, I guess it's my turn," and pushed in after him. I was in a coal chute all right, from the feel of it and after I'd eased myself down as far as possible, I let go. I went down like a greased pig, expecting to hit the coal pile at any moment, but before that happened, I flew off into space and seemed to drop free about four miles.

Luckily it was the soft powdery kind of coal and I wasn't hurt. I wiped the dust out of my eyes and heard Mike say, "Sorry I couldn't warn you about that last drop."

I said, "Thanks," and began coughing.

Mike said, "You wait and try to catch Lorrie when she comes down. I'll scout ahead and see what I can find in the way of an escape hatch."

He padded off into the darkness and I listened for activity up above. I heard what sounded like Lorrie c r a w l i n g through the window and then heard her shoes scrape in the chute and braced myself to catch her and ease her fall.

I caught her and we went down in a heap in the lousy coal dust. She hit me kind of heavy, right in the chest and I lay there for a minute trying to get my breath. Then I heard her giggling in my ear. She said, "I guess I should have worn slacks for this trip instead of a skirt, Arty."

I thought so too, but I'd been too polite to say it. I tried to move but I was jammed down in the coal with Lorrie on top of me and just then I felt a bite on my ear. I said, "Hey, cut it out!"

Lorrie giggled again. "It isn't very often I get you in a spot like this, darling. I think I'll take my time about getting up."

"Look," I said. "This is no time for foolishness!"

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She kissed me, hard. "Is this foolishness?"

"It's—it's not the time or the place!" Holy cats, I thought, smooching in a coal pile.

I managed to push Lorrie off and struggled to my feet and hauled her up. She's changed, now, and wasn't at all scared. In fact, she seemed to be having the time of her life. She said, "I'll need three showers after this," and followed along as I took her hand and inched along in the direction Mike had gone.

Just then I heard his voice from further on. "If you two are through making love, I've found a door."

We groped our way to him and he pushed the door open. "The furnace room," I said.

"It follows," Mike cracked. "You'd hardly expect to find the library right next to the coal pile."

I could tell the way he talked that his nerves were tight. Mine were too, and I wondered how I'd ever allowed Lorrie to talk us into the mad caper. I said, "As long as we've come this far, we might as well go the rest of the way."

We found a stairway that lead to the main floor and peeked out through the door. "Where are all the bright lights you w e r e t a l k i n g about?" Lorrie asked.

"Keep your voice down," Mike hissed. "I guess he hasn't got them turned on."

They weren't and that was a fact. The whole place was lit by a faint soft glow from the neon tubes in the ceiling. If Professor Dickstein was really lighting the place with atomic power, this must have been the atom's night off.

Mike said, "The Tin Woodman was in that closet right there, wasn't it?"

"That's right. The Professor brought us down this hall from the front of the house."

"Okay," Mike said. "You want a nut off one of its bolts. Did anybody think to bring a wrench?"

"I did," Lorrie whispered.

I gave her a quick look as she took a small adjustable wrench from her pocket. I said, "So that was what banged me on the skull when you came down the chute."

Lorrie smiled at me dreamily. "That," she said, "and other things. Now step aside while I go in there and get my nut."

Several things happened at once, then. Lorrie tiptoed to the closet and opened the door and we could all see that the closet was empty.

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She turned and looked at us with disappointment, but her expression quickly turned to one of sudden fright when we heard footsteps approaching up the hall from the rear of the house.

Mike leaped over and got Lorrie by the arm and hauled her back to the door through which we'd entered and we all got out of the hall with the door open a crack and listened to the steps coming closer.

They sounded odd, heavy, very slow and deliberate; not like the steps of a human being at all.

And they weren't because, just at that moment, the Tin Woodman turned a corner and came into sight down the hall. He was a horrible looking thing now — not a harmless hulk of clumsy metal. There were lights in his head that glowed evilly, and the sound of machinery humming inside of him as he walked along.

"I thought Prof. Dickstein said he hadn't energized that thing yet," I whispered.

"Be quiet!" Mike whispered back. "Maybe it can hear voices. We don't want it to spot us."

We crouched there, holding our breath while the robot came closer and closer. I think we all said prayers. If we did, they were answered, because the Tin Woodman lumbered right past us and into his closet. Once inside, he turned around, facing the front, and then his lights went out and the motors, or whatever they were inside him, died and he was quiet—just as we'd seen him on our previous visit.

"He's dead," Lorrie whispered.

"About as dead as a stick of dynamite," Mike grumbled. "Did you see what was on his left hand when he went by?"

I didn't have time to say, no I hadn't—what was it? before Lorrie slid between us and out into the hall. "I'm going to get my nut!"

Mike hissed, "Come back here, you fool!" But we could both see it was no use trying to stop her. It would only have caused a scuffle. So we stood there holding our breath again while she slipped into the closet beside the robot and began looking him over.

We could see her fairly well and saw her start to work on a nut under the robot's left arm. She couldn't move it for a minute. Then it came and she twisted a couple of times with the wrench and finished the job with her fingers.

She turned and hurried back to the door behind which we were waiting. But she didn't

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look as happy as I'd expected. Her face was white, even in the dull glow from the neons.

She said, "On his hands—I —I guess they're hands—there was—"

"I know," Mike snapped. "Blood. I saw it when he walked by. Let's get out of here."

"That's for me," Lorrie said, smiling wanly. "Maybe this whole thing wasn't such a good idea."

They started toward the rear. I stayed where I was. Mike looked back and said, "Come on — what are you waiting for?"

I said, "You take Lorrie and find some way out. I'm going to stay and look around."

Mike stared as though I'd gone crazy. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No. I'm just going to look around a little."

"For Lord's sake, why?"

"Maybe something's wrong. We haven't seen the Professor anywhere. And the blood on that thing. I want to see what gives around here."

Mike looked at Lorrie uncertainly, then back to me. "Do you think you can find your way—"

I said, "You go with her. Getting her out is the most important thing we've got to do."

"All right," Mike said, grudgingly. "But watch yourself."

After they disappeared down the hall, I stood there for a minute, looking at the robot and remembering Professor Dickstein's laboratory. At the far end from where we had entered that night, I'd seen a doorway at the top of some stairs that ran up along the wall. I wondered if I could find the way to that door from the rear.

I decided to try. I moved along the hall toward the rear of the house and found a stairway. It didn't go in the direction of the laboratory, but it would at least get me to the second floor. I went up and found another hallway, but it was even darker up there. You could just make your way along if you went very slow. I turned left when I got up there and began walking in the direction of the laboratory.

Then I saw the door I wanted, or thought I did; a door with bright light coming through a small glass pane in the upper half.

I went toward it, walking on tiptoe because there weren't any carpets on the floor. I

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was concentrating on the door so hard that I paid no attention to anything else. And as I passed a dark alcove — a niche like the ones you sometimes find in hallways with statues in them—I felt a hand shoot out and snake around my throat.

It wasn't a statue's hand, either. It was bone and muscle and it had power. I was hauled into the alcove and I began fighting. I couldn't yell because there was a hand over my mouth, gagging me and weight and power pulling me down until I lay helpless.

A voice hissed in my ear. "Be quiet! You're all right! I'm not going to hurt you. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

The hand slipped away from my mouth. I said, "I'm—I'm Art Fleming. I—"

"What are you doing here?"

That voice sounded familiar. I was trying to think where I'd heard it before. I said, "Maybe I could ask you the same thing." Then; before he could answer, I remembered and said, "You're that FBI man."

"Sam Carney. Now tell me—"

"You're all bloody. What happened."

"I tangled with that damned robot Dickstein's got in here. Listen, do you know your way out of this place?"

"Not exactly. I—"

Carney muttered to himself. It sounded like he was swearing. "Then I want you to stay right here and be quiet. There's something I've got to do. I'll come back and get you when I'm finished. That's a promise."

He got up and went back the way I'd come, lurching a little as though his bout with the robot had been tougher than he'd let on.

After he was gone I sat for a little while in the dark, wondering what a man from the FBI was doing in Professor Dickstein's house. He could only have been there as a result of my contacting him. Or could he? If so, there must have been something sinister involved in Dickstein's saying he was a bachelor when the picture I'd seen certainly looked like a man and his family.

I puzzled it over for a while and then got real brave. The FBI man had not returned and I got an itch to see what, if anything, was going on in the laboratory. I was just ready to have a try at it when I heard Sam Carney coming back along the hall. At least, I thought it was him, but when the form came in sight, it was

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much neater and more attractive than Carney's.

Lorrie.

She came up the hall on tiptoe, and I could see the fear in her eyes. This turned to panic when I reached out of the alcove and got a hand over her mouth and hauled her in.

She fought like a little tiger and it was a good thing I had a solid hold on her—not one I'd take under any but extraordinary circumstances—and that my hand stayed over her mouth.

I said, "Stop it! Stop fighting. It's me! Art! Relax and tell me what you're doing here."

I felt a big sigh of relief go out of her when she heard my name and then she softened up and clung to me. She said, "Oh, Arty! It's you! It's really you! I thought I was done for when you grabbed me!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I—I gave Mike the slip when we got outside and came back because—"

"Because why?"

"I didn't want to leave you, Arty. I was afraid something would happen to you."

I felt like slugging her for pulling a stunt like that, but at the same time, it was nice to know she cared that much. I said, "Well, you're here. Now there's nothing we can do about it. I met the guy that the robot got bloody from. He'll be back in a minute and then we'll all get out of here."

Lorrie pointed to the door with light coming through the panel in the top. "What's going on in there?"

"I was just going to find out. Be real quiet."

We tiptoed to the door and looked through the panel.

It was the laboratory Mike and I had seen before. The Professor was in there and a moment after we started watching, the door on the far side opened and the robot walked in. I don't know whether Dickstein had called the thing or not, but it came in and stood beside the door and its lights went down to a faint glimmer and it stopped moving.

There was someone else in the laboratory too. The girl I'd seen in the drug store and again on the first visit to Dickstein's weird mansion.

The girl in the picture with Dickstein and the woman.

She was very beautiful and had a shape like a million dollars, but I wasn't interested in either point. I grabbed Lorrie's hand and whispered. "That girl—can you see her?"

"Of course. I'm not blind."

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"Well, somebody is, because the last two times no one could see her but me."

Lorrie pushed her nose against the panel and stared. "You mean that's the mysterious girl you saw in the drug store?"

"That's right."

When Lorrie pushed against the door, it opened a couple of inches and we could hear Dickstein's voice. He said, "I think this will be the last test, my dear. We were fortunate in discovering that the refractions from tinted lenses offset my basic formula. I've made some changes."

The girl said, "Yes, father." She spoke in a dull lifeless voice as though she'd been hypnotized or something. I'd read a book once about a girl named Trilby who was under the control of some voice teacher, and this girl sounded exactly the way I figured Trilby had sounded when that guy cracked the whip.

Dickstein said, "The tube is filled, my dear." He glanced at a notebook on the bench. "This is—yes, the fourteenth test. If it is successful, we've done the trick in an amazingly short time. If it works, we can leave Ridgefield immediately."

I heard a gasp from Lorrie who was pressing close to me. She whispered. "Good heavens! The little huzzy is—is undressing!"

It was true. The girl had bent over and taken the hem of her dress and pulled the dress off over her head. She stood there in a bra and panties, shoes and stockings and a garter belt. While we stared, she took off the garter belt and rolled the stockings down, kicked off her shoes and removed the stockings.

"Is—is she going to—?" Lorrie asked.

"I think she is."

She took off the bra and then reached for the panties. Lorrie hadn't believed she'd go so far and I could feel the heat of her blushes. Lorrie said, "Why, it's unbelievable! Right there in front of her own father!"

"It's awful," I said.

Lorrie glanced up quickly. "Well, you don't have to stare so hard. You could look in the other direction!"

"Shhh—" I warned.

Dickstein was s p e a k i n g again. "All right. Into the tube, my dear, and we'll get this over with."

"Yes, father." Her long, slim legs carried her to the tank, where she stood quietly until Dickstein brought a ladder. He held it firm while she

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climbed to the top of the tube and eased her body up and into it with a single, lithe motion.

Lorrie's nails were digging into my flesh but I hardly felt them. Lorrie gasped, "Why, she'll drown in there."

"I don't think so. I don't think the stuff in there is water. It's some kind of solution Dickstein's using to make her invisible."

"That's impossible!"

"No it isn't. Look!"

As we watched, the body of the naked girl began to vanish—to seemingly dissolve before our eyes. In not more than sixty seconds, there was nothing in the tube so far as we could see, but the original solution.

And I noticed another thing. Dickstein had succeeded in what he'd been trying to do, because I could no longer see the girl through my glasses.

"She's gone!" Lorrie whispered.

"That's right. Dickstein's found a method of making people invisible."

Dickstein wasn't satisfied yet. Now he began throwing differently colored lights on the tank. Some had no effect at all, but he finally hit on a combination that revealed the girl submerged in the tank.

I don't know whether he was satisfied or not because, just then, I realized—to my horror—that Lorrie and I had got much too interested in the experiment. We'd gradually pushed the door wider and wider and had moved forward until we were now standing on the platform at the top of the stairs; standing there in plain sight of Professor Dickstein.

He looked up and saw us and his face turned white as milk. And now, I saw another Dickstein. There had been several of him, but this one was the worst; the crazy one. You could see the madness in his eyes and hatred in the twist of his features.

"Don't move!" he roared.

I wasn't in the mood to obey any order like that—not at a time like this. I turned and pushed Lorrie toward the door we'd entered through, but Dickstein whirled around and touched a switch under the bench. The door locked automatically before I could reach it.

Dickstein turned and looked at the robot. "Get them," he said.

Evidently, it was attuned to respond to vibrations in his voice because its head lit up and it started walking toward the stairway.

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We were trapped! I stood there regretting everything, including the first time I'd seen Dickstein's daughter walk into the drug store. Me and my long nose! Even then, if I hadn't been so curious, everything would have been all right. All I'd have had to do was mind my own business. But no! Long-nosed Arty Fleming had to start prying and here we were.

Lorrie must have realized what I was thinking because she said, "It's all my fault, Arty. I didn't have to be so stubborn about that nut. I got us into this."

"It doesn't matter much who's to blame now, honey—"

Lorrie clung to me. "You realize it's the first time you ever called me that?"

Women! You can't figure them. There we were — ten feet from death—and Lorrie was thrilled at being called *honey*.

The robot was halfway up the stairs now—and Lorrie began saving our lives. Or at least, what she'd done had started saving us. As the robot took another step upward, I saw the plate under his arm come loose from the bolt that held it; the bolt from which Lorrie had removed the nut.

Another step, and the plate fell off and something inside became misplaced because the lights in the robot's head flared even brighter, and it stopped and stood there as though pondering some big robot problem.

Dickstein, down below, raised his voice again. "Get them!" he cried. "Get them!" Again and again, he spoke the words, but the robot did not respond. It just stood there, and something inside its head began clicking irregularly and even I could tell it was all wrong.

Dickstein must have said, "Get them!" fifty times with no result. Then he stopped and stared at the robot for a moment and said, "Kill them!" He waited to see what the result would be on the robot's receiving mechanism.

The robot seemed to shiver. There was grinding metal as it strained against itself. Then it turned and went back down the stairs.

Dickstein screamed. "No! No! Kill them, you imbecile! They are dangerous. They must die!"

The mixture of vibrations seemed to drive the robot mad. It got to the foot of the stairs and began walking toward Dickstein. Faster and faster. Fright appeared on the

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Professor's face, and he seemed to regard the robot as human, because he screamed, "You stupid, faithless idiot! Do as you're told. Follow my orders!"

Something in the words deflected the robot from its path toward Dickstein. Head vibrating, it stopped for a moment and seemed to be smelling the air. Then it seized a huge steel tool standing against the wall, and lumbered toward the tube in the center of the laboratory.

"No! No!" Dickstein was screaming. But this time the robot was not lured from its course. It advanced on the tube, raised the club and swung it ponderously against the glass.

The tube shattered with a kind of roar, as though the solution inside, when agitated by the smashing of the tube, had very high explosive qualities.

But the horrible thing was the sudden appearance of the girl. She came into sight as the solution flowed away, dimly at first, but then there was the blood from the gashes caused by the murderous points and edges of the smashed glass.

As she sprawled across the smashed tube and then fell to the floor, she was slashed in a dozen places, anyone of them fatal.

Lorrie screamed and I went sick at my stomach. At that moment, I heard a pounding and turned to see Sam Carney's face pressed against the glass panel of the door. He made motions indicating he wanted me to open it and I made motions back telling him I couldn't.

He scowled and then his face disappeared and I heard the thunder of a gun going off. Instantly, the door swung open and I saw Sam Carney standing there with an automatic in his hand.

He came through and for a minute the three of us stood there watching the robot going berserk. It was terrible to see — that steel monster smashing everything in sight, swinging his club in all directions while Dickstein, squealing like a trapped rat, tried to escape death.

He didn't. The robot could move a lot faster than anyone would think and it trapped Dickstein behind one of the benches and smashed his skull with one blow.

Sam Carney appeared to have been in a trance, but now he snapped out of it and yelled, "Come on! We've got to get out of here or we're done for. Follow me!"

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He kited down the hall with Lorrie and me right behind him. Behind us, we could hear the robot heightening its frenzy as it wrecked the laboratory.

Carney led us into a new section of the house to where he had a window pried open. He picked Lorrie up bodily and almost threw her out of the room into the yard beyond. I went out then, and Carney followed almost falling in his hurry.

But once outside, he gave us no rest. "Hurry up," he said. "Make for that wall and get over it and crouch down behind it."

"What's the rush?" I asked.

"Get going!"

We went over the wall and did as he said and we'd hardly crouched down behind the bricks when there was a tremendous roar. The ground shuddered under us, but the wall held, and except for a wave of heat, we felt no ill-effects.

I looked at Carney and he said, "That's what the hurry was. That explosion was overdue. I never thought we'd make it."

I raised up and peeked over the wall and saw a vast sheet of flame reaching skyward, completely obliterating the Ricker mansion—and everyone inside....

"You did us a big favor, Art," Carney told me the next day after some of the excitement had died down. "I wouldn't want it to get around, but we'd lost track of Dickstein. We had him spotted a year ago, but then he vanished. You helped us relocate him just in time."

"I still can't figure what he was up to."

"He was a top Russian scientist who wanted to do some experimenting on atomic fission but the Russians couldn't come up with the supplies he needed. So, instead of stealing them here and taking them to him in Russia, they brought him over here to the supplies."

"Of all the damned nerve—"

"They've got plenty of that. The big mistake with Dickstein was that he was too brilliant. He indulged in sidelines. He built the robot and got interested in his invisibility idea while he was supposed to be perfecting a new and greater bomb."

"He didn't work on the bomb?"

"Yes and no. He worked with the atom, but got interested in peaceful uses of it.

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He used it to light his home, to heat the place and do other useful things. There was a gold mine of information blown up when that house went."

"He was responsible for the death of his own daughter!"

"His wife, too. He performed the earlier invisibility experiments on her. They killed her. I found her body in the basement."

"He must have been completely ruthless."

"He was. He left me for dead in the corridor where I grabbed you. He thought the robot had killed me."

"What did you go after when you left me in the hall?"

"I'd seen a phone in the basement and I went down to call headquarters. But before I got there I saw something was wrong with his atomic furnace. One of the heat exchangers was red hot and it was too late to do anything about it. It was a very small furnace—practically a facsimile of the real thing, but you saw the damage it did."

"He was a strange man."

"That's right. He wasn't a Russian, really; a Bulgarian, I think. The Russians swung him to their side by brainwashing him. I'm not sure they really succeeded."

"Too bad we couldn't have gotten him sooner."

"That's right. His madness could no doubt have been traced to their treatment of him."

We'd been talking in the drug store and now Carney got off his stool and said, "Well, I've got to be going."

"So long."

He started away, then stopped and turned, grinning. "Don't hesitate to let us know if you bump into any more—ah, undraped females."

"I don't think I will," I grinned back.

After he was gone, I left too. There was only one female I was interested in—and she wasn't undraped. She was at home in bed, getting over the shock of the night before and I wanted all of a sudden to know exactly how she was.

THE END

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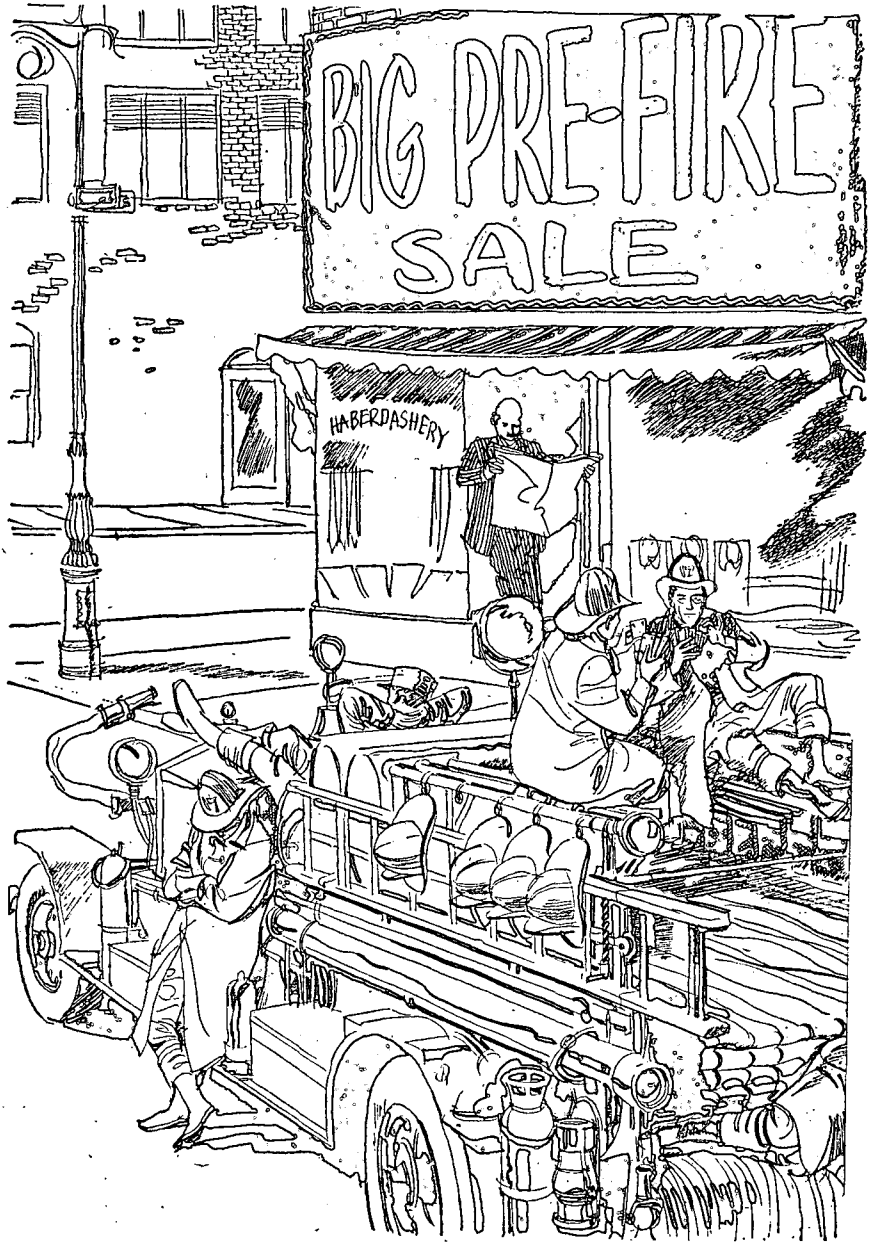

40 Nobody believed Sam—but the fire department was taking no chances!

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COME TUESDAY

By WINSTON MARKS

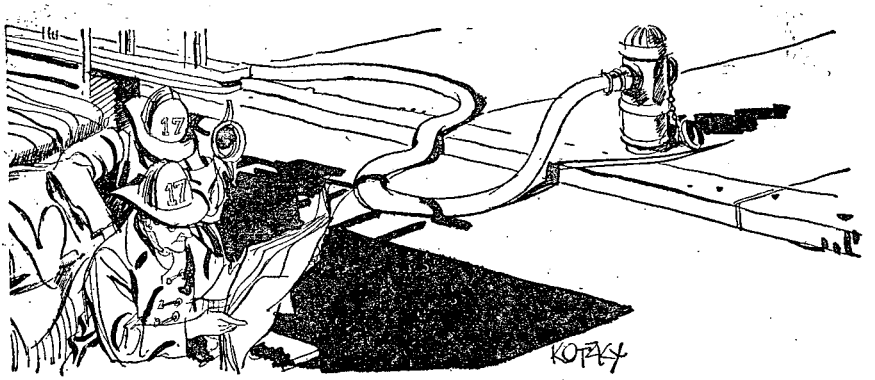
Say what you will about Sam: he was the guy to come up with the unique pitch on sales. Like holding a fire sale before *lighting the match. The insurance boys and the cops were understandably upset, but—and here's the real snapper—Sam blamed it all on television!*

SAM, the haberdasher, is having a pre-fire sale," Bessie remarked over the toast and marmalade. "You should pick up some shirts. Your white shirts are—"

"Try that again," I told her. Bessie is a great little skid-talker.

She looked up unsuspecting and said, "I just read you the ad the way it's printed here. Sam, the haberdasher, is having a pre-fire sale. And I thought you might—"

"There, I got you to repeat it," I said. "Twice now I distinctly heard you say, 'Pre-fire sale.' You're skiddin' again, gal."



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She shot me a sharp glance. Bessie is not one to laugh at her own mistakes, but suddenly she giggled. "I get it. How can Sam have a pre-fire sale, except he knows he's going to have a fire? And that's illegal."

"Exactly," I agreed, taking the paper from her. "Now you see, what it really says is—"

I choked. What it really said was: "VISIT SAM'S GIGANTIC PRE-FIRE SALE. EVERYTHING MUST GO! BURNING OUT NEXT TUESDAY."

Bessie was laughing again. "The look on your face!" she said. "Like nothing inhuman."

Down at the office the boss refused to take the thing seriously. "So he's trying for a laugh. So he's poking fun at his competitors down on skid-row."

I said, "Samson Peterson *is* on skid-row, and he doesn't try for laughs. He's a somber, self-educated Swede from the old country, honest as a bank-teller and twice as unimaginative."

"What are you trying to tell me, George?" Mr Kooteneck said with the first tinge of concern.

"You'd better check to see if we have a policy with Sam Peterson, because if Sam says he's going to burn out next Tuesday he'll burn out," I told him.

Kooteneck picked up the phone. "I'll call the uptown office and——" He slammed the phone back in the cradle. "No I won't. This is damned ridiculous."

He shoved three file folders at me. "These are real claims. Get on them, and forget this nonsense."

And that's the way it was. Nobody took Sam's pre-fire sale seriously. Not even the customers.

It was late afternoon before I got down to Washington Street to visit Sam. His small store front was plastered with red and blue signs that said Sam was holding this pre-fire sale, everything must go, and hurry up and buy, because Tuesday was the last day. This was Thursday.

He was cranking up his tattered awning I yelled, "How goes the sale?" He came over to the curb, spat snoose in the gutter and stuck his head in the window of my car.

"No one pay damned bit of attention. I take in eight dollars. How are you doing, George?"

I said I was fine, and then, "I had you pegged for honest,

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Sam. What's with this pre-fire sale?"

He shifted his quid to one cheek and stared back thoughtfully out of those honest, blue eyes. "I got bargains," he said simply. "I got six dozen your favorite shirts, your size. Wholesale to you. To anybody, but nobody pays attention to my sale. They come in, smell for smoke, don't smell smoke and say, 'Hell, it's a gyp!' Damn fool, don't read my signs. Fire ain't until Tuesday."

He said it as matter-of-factly as if he were complaining about taxes. I stared at the smaller print on the sign, trying to catch some hint of his gimmick. "Prices Slashed!" it read. "Don't let all this good stuff burn up."

If I hadn't been an old customer of Sam's, and if I had not phoned the downtown office and discovered that he *did* hold a fire policy with my company, I'd have driven off like the rest of his customers.

Instead I said, "Tell you what, Sam, I'll take that six dozen shirts—if you tell me one little thing."

"Yah, yah, I know," he said, combing his silver-streaked mop of yellow hair with thick fingers. "How come I know the place burn up next Tuesday, hey?"

"Exactly, hey?"

"Come in," he invited. I did and waited patiently while he dug out a pile of boxes each containing three shirts and put them in my car. He came in grinning. "That's hundred sixty-eight dollar and—and skip the cents."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll mail your check to the State prison. You dumb Swede, don't you realize that arson is a serious offense?"

"Who's gonna arson?"

"You, Sam, or else your signs make you a liar. Now which is it? I'll warn you right now, you'll play the devil trying to collect a fire-damage claim——"

"Don't get excited, George," he said patting me on the back. "Come. I show you something peculiar."

Peculiar he said.

We went through a curtain to the rear. Samson Peterson didn't quite live up to his first name, but he was big and much too clumsy to live tidily in such a cramped space. A bunk, sink, table and TV set were wedged among surplus store stock. Every time he moved he knocked something off a shelf.

He turned on the 12-inch TV, invited me to sit down

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on the bunk and poured us cups of his inevitable coffee.

"Twenty year I put in up in North wood, making stake to buy store. I like it here. Make purty good living."

"Get to the point, will you Sam?"

"Take it easy, George. I'm coming to it. So I bought this telewision set a while back, see. Second hand, and it's screwed up. Serve me right. Second hand yunk."

About this time the set came on, and it looked perfectly normal except it was a little faint, maybe.

"And what's that got to do with your pre-fire sale?"

"So I saw it on telewision. I saw my nice store burning up next Tuesday. Screwed up set. Don't show what's going on today. Show everything eleven day from now. Last Friday night I'm watching special telewision broadcast. Big fire. They turn picture on store burning up. Guess whose?"

If Sam had been some neurotic young kid, over-stimulated by the flood of fanciful fiction on the market, I could have patted him on the head and gone home to dinner.

But Sam was Sam! Steady, unimaginative, honest Sam.

"You're trying to tell me you have some sort of a time machine here?" I asked as evenly as I could. "A gadget that shows you the future some eleven days ahead of time?"

He shook his head stolidly. "Just screwed up telewision, I tell you. No damned good. Never show what the paper say is on telewision. Look at it now. Who ever hear of Lucy being on Thursday?"

I didn't give it a second thought. We don't own a TV, and I've never paid any attention to the schedules. I examined the TV. It was a Pritchard-Ball table model of early vintage. The line cord ended at the wall socket in a rather massive plug. Rabbit-ears sat on top of the set. In short, nothing very extraordinary. "Why don't you take it to a repairman?"

He shook his head. "I did. Three different one. They all start squawking about a-cees and dee-cees and wolts and calling me stupid Swede. I get mad and walk out."

"Look, Sam," I said earnestly, "take down that 'pre-fire' sale sign and forget the whole thing. And next Tuesday you better come to my place. Spend the night."

He started to smile, then his big mouth closed tight. "Why," he asked, "next Tuesday night?"

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"So you'll have an alibi if the joint should burn down, you big dope! Nastier coincidences have happened."

He popped a sugar lump in his big mouth and sucked black coffee through it. "Then you believe me?"

"Not a word of it! But you've given the firebugs in this city a wide open invitation to be cute. Now get that sign down!"

"If you say so, George. You're a nice guy, George."

And that was the first thing Bessie said when I got home. "You're a nice guy! Holler your head off if dinner isn't ready on the dot, then you walk in here an hour late!"

I kissed away the grouch, and then she admitted, "I was across the hall watching Helen's TV."

"Oh," I said casually. "How was Lucy tonight?"

"I Love Lucy?" Bessie raised her eyebrows. "Lucy comes on Monday nights. Everyone knows that."

Sure. Everyone. Even Sam.

I gave that a second thought, all right, but it was too fantastic. Sam had *said* it was Lucy, yet the picture had been a little faded, and I hadn't been paying too much attention.

I tried to dismiss the whole thing, but next morning old Kooteneck called me in. "I checked uptown about this Sam Peterson's haberdashery," he told me. "He does have a fire policy with us. Stop by there and look around."

"I've been," I said. "The old boy's having quiet little hallucinations of conflagration."

"I thought you said he was stable and unimaginative?"

"That was yesterday. Now I say he's a little touched. Harmless, but he's got this—this obsession."

"You're sure he's harmless?"

"See here," I objected, "I'm hired to settle claims, not prevent them."

Kooteneck stared through me. "You look guilty of something, George. Are you mixed up in this thing?"

I started to get mad, then I thought better. Kooteneck can smell anything phony across interstellar space. I confessed, "I don't know what to think. Sam *doesn't* really seem off his rocker. He's just as calm and reasonable as ever, except he sticks to this one silly contention."

Kooteneck scolded me with a curt nod. "All right, George. But keep an eye on the place."

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That's how I happened to return the following Saturday. The silly signs were down. Now the window sheets just read, ALL PRICES WHOLESALE. CLEARING OUT! EVERYTHING MUST GO, which looked very normal for the neighborhood.

Sam joked, "More shirts?"

I hadn't had the nerve to take them out of the car and show Bessie. "You know I can't use six dozen shirts, Sam," I said. "Now why don't you take them back and——"

"Okay, George," he said mildly. "You see you just can't change the future."

So he was sticking to his story. We went into his back room and he poured coffees. I said, "Supposing you did have a TV set that told the future. Why, you'd be the richest man in the world!"

He stared at me out of those big, blue eyes, and I found it hard to hold onto my suspicions. "How?" he asked.

"Why, the baseball games, horse-races, stock market——"

He thought that over. "Like Cleveland beating the Yankee eighteen to two tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Why if you knew a thing like that ahead of time you could . . . *Eighteen to two?*" I exclaimed.

"They really walloped 'em," he said.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yah. I mean ten days ago on my screwed-up tee-wee set."

I sat back down on the bunk slopping coffee on my pants. "That's what I mean, Sam. If you were telling the truth you could get big odds on a bet like that."

His big blond head waggled. "I'm surprised at you, George. That wouldn't be honest. I played lotsa poker, but I never checked no cinch. Besides, that would be bucking fate."

"Fate?"

"Yah. It wouldn't work. Something would go wrong."

"What could go wrong?"

He was quiet for quite a while. "I've thought about this, George. Sure, I've thought of betting, but that would change the future, and you can't do that."

"Just as I thought," I said. "You're a phony!"

"Say what you like. You can't change the future. If I don't know about the score for tomorrow I don't make a bet, do I? So I'm not meant to get rich that way. If I do win, then fate all screwed up like my tee-wee set."

I said, "You're a fatalist and a liar to boot."

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"Fatalist? Yah, maybe. But I'm no liar, George. You see. Eighteen to two. Cleveland Indian."

I walked out mad, not sure what was irritating me. I headed for a certain place where they will bet you the sun won't rise tomorrow if the odds are right. Then I realized that I *wanted* to believe Sam, and the guy I was mad at was myself for being so skeptical.

"How much," I asked the man wearing the green visor, "would you bet against a ten-spot that the Cleveland Indians won't win by sixteen runs tomorrow?"

He smiled. "With Whitey Ford pitching?" The actual odds were probably a thousand to one, but he said, "Oh, let's call it about a 50-to-1 shot."

I said, "Okay, let's call it that. Here's my ten dollars against your five hundred." He took the money and wrote it down in his little book without knocking an ash off of his cigarette.

A fellow in a loud suit followed me outside. "I'll give you a hundred-to-one if you'll put up a real wad."

I said no thanks and went home thinking of sounder ways I could have spent ten dollars.

Late Sunday I was pounding on Sam's door, my heart full of larceny. Sam finally unlocked. Before I could explode he said, "You went and bet, didn't you, George."

"I don't know what kind of pipe-line you have, but count me in," I said. "Look here! Five hundred bucks I win!"

Sam didn't even look down. "You didn't *win* it, George."

"Knock that off!" I said. "I didn't steal it any more than you tried to steal that hundred and sixty-eight dollars from me by unloading six dozen of your shirts on me."

"No, George. I charged you wholesale. Just what I paid. Just what I would claim from the insurance company when they burned up. I just hate to see all this stuff wasted."

"Well, never mind that. What game did you see tomorrow? I mean eleven—no, ten days ago today?"

"I don't remember. That was long time ago."

"You remembered today's game just as long. Think!"

"Who wouldn't remember score like eighteen-to-two? Sorry, George. I don't even remember who play tomorrow."

I found the TV schedule in the daily paper. "Look, Sam.

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They're televising the Chicago-Brooklyn game."

"Who pitched?"

I looked that up and told him.

"Oh, yah! They both got knocked out of the box. Let's see. Yah, by golly. Brooklyn won nine to eight."

"Thanks, Sam." The fever had me. I slammed out of there without even drinking my coffee.

Sam's last words were, "But you shouldn't, George!"

I won a small bet at even odds—but. Tuesday was my big day—a shutout in the American Association! Old Green-Eyeshade was itching to get back the $800 I'd lifted from him. He allowed that 50-to-1 wasn't unreasonable against a shut-out.

Forty thousand dollars! I hadn't dreamed he'd cover the whole amount. I passed through the curtains, through the dusty cigar-store that fronted the gambling place.

"You can't change the future!" Sam had said. Well, I was about to change *my* future—some $40,000 worth.

Or was I? I felt the first bites of sharp little doubts. Had Sam leveled with me about today's game? He had been pretty disgusted at my trying to cash in on his screwed up "tee-wee" set.

I looked up at the sky. It was cloudy. Suppose the game was rained out? Or suppose Sam's memory was bad? So there was a shut-out. Maybe it was the other team got it. Come to think of it, did I listen straight? Was it the Phillies or the Orioles? What did I tell the bookie?

Nuts! I couldn't make a mistake like that. Quit worrying, I told myself. It's in the bag.

Just the same, Sam's voice kept coming back, "You can't change the future, George."

Lunch was a trial. In the first place Bessie wasn't expecting me. And the more casual I tried to be about it, the more suspicious she got. Finally she came out with it. "Did you lose your job, George?"

"Nnnnno——" I said, lingering over the suggestion. "How would you like to winter in Bermuda, honey?"

She sniffed. "The onions in that cole-slaw is as close as we'll ever get to Bermuda." Another fatalist—and in my own family!

I turned on the radio, and a terrible question sprang into my mind. Suppose I did win? Would I be paid off? It would be cheaper for the bookie to move out of town.

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He was a small operator, and —or was he? Was he fronting for a syndicate? If so, would the syndicate pay off? Debt of honor. They always paid off in the movies. But sometimes in lead. Honor? Among crooks? It was an illegal operation to begin with. What legal or moral right did I have to expect——?

Well, you can see why I sat there listening to the ball game and hearing hardly a word the announcer said. I do remember his getting pretty excited as the game neared the end, and the shut-out became a distinct possibility. By then Bessie was nagging at me for not going back to work and doing her best to worm my secret out of me.

Then the game was over. I'd won!

I started for the door, but Bessie blocked me with the phone. "It's Mr. Kooteneck, and I don't wonder!"

Before I could think up a good lie I said, "Hello!"

Luckily, the boss took no exception to catching me at home. "I'm nervous about this Peterson business," he confessed. "Have you given that place a good going over?"

"Sure," I said cheerfully. "It's a fire-trap. It could go anytime. But look at the premium he's paying."

It wasn't the gay tone of voice I'd have chosen if I had not been half hysterical over my own worries. Kooteneck was understandably annoyed. "See here, George, if that Swede sets fire to his business tonight——"

"Forget it!" I said. "I've fixed it so he can't. He's due here for dinner at six o'clock. By his own prediction the place won't burn until after eleven. I won't let him out of my sight. Besides, like I told you, he's no arsonist."

"Firebugs come in all packages," he grumbled reassured.

I lit out for the bookie joint. It would be closed, I was sure of it. The cigar store would have a small sign: OUT OF BUSINESS, and that would be that.

Only it didn't. The door squeaked open easily under my frantic thrust, and when I burst through the curtains into the back room with its card tables and cuspidors, there was Green-Eyeshade, looking as bored and untroubled as ever.

He did stare at me a little oddly with just a trace of a smile on his thin lips. "You look worried."

"Well—uh—I was afraid you—uh—might have closed

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up for the night, or something."

"You illustrate an odd fact of human nature," he said leaning forward on the counter with his elbows. "People never doubt our honesty until they win a big bet. Which is why we can afford to be honest." A neat bit of skid-talking in itself, but I caught one hopeful thought from it.

"You mean——"

"That we're going to pay you off? Of course, mister!"

I shoved out my hand. He reached under the counter and came up with some bills and a little black book. "But this," I said, "is only a thousand dollars."

"And this," he pointed to a page in the little book, "is the entry that says we owe you the rest. We don't keep that kind of dough around here. The balance tomorrow morning. A grand's enough to celebrate on tonight, isn't it?"

The quiet, scornful way he said it made me feel ashamed. He pressed further, "if you insist, I'll make a phone call. We could complete delivery by messenger tonight."

"Don't bother," I said. "Tomorrow's fine."

That's what I said. *"Don't bother!* Tomorrow's fine!"

Big, nonchalant me. I gave my address, stuffed the bills in my pocket and walked out, my weight on my heels.

The late afternoon sun had a golden tinge to it, and even the exhaust smoke from a diesel truck smelled good as it rumbled past. I was rich! Across town I honked out front of Sam's haberdashery. It was just closing time, and out came Sam in his Sunday suit, two sizes too small, looking like the ex-lumberjack that he was. He handed me some papers.

"My inventory. You want to check it over before we go?"

I glanced at the carefully itemized sheets and shook my head. "Your word's good enough for me, Sam. By the way, where did you move your TV set and other personal belongings?"

"I move nothing," he said. "Like I told you, you can't change the future, George. Besides, I got everything listed in the inventory. I got insurance." He protested, of course. But I pointed out that at the very best his insurance coverage would fall short a thousand dollars of his actual loss, so he wouldn't be making any "fate-defying" gain from the transaction.

"Well, maybe you right," he admitted at last. He un-

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locked the door, and we loaded the little obsolete TV into the back seat. He locked up again, patted the door jamb and said, "Good-bye, little store," and for the life of me I couldn't keep a tight feeling out of my throat.

"Come on, get in," I yelled. "We'll find you another store just as good. Anyhow, maybe it won't burn down after all. And in that case I'll buy those shirts back at full retail."

He wasn't even listening.

Bessie expected us, but not the TV set. Her joy faded to disappointment when I told her I'd have to get it fixed before we could operate it. I had neglected to prepare her for the shock of owning any TV set, and mister, this was not just *any* TV set.

Bessie didn't start getting nosey with Sam until after dinner and the dishes were done. Then she came in drying her hands on the dish towel and interrupted our checker game. "How did your pre-fire sale come off, Sam?"

Sam grunted and looked at me. "George made me stop."

"Why, why? I thought it was a cute idea? After all, how many stores that run fire sales actually have fires?"

I said, "The public has no sense of humor, and neither has our claims office. If Sam's store *should* burn down tonight, you and I will both be called as witnesses to give him an alibi. That's why I invited him over."

"How rude!" Bessie exclaimed. "Well, *I'm* glad to have you, anyway, Sam."

"Nice to know George's wife," Sam allowed, a little embarrassed at my duplicity. "We been friends a very long time."

Well, the evening wore on with checkers and chit-chat until about a quarter to eleven. That's when the fire sirens began. A tiny shiver started in the middle of my spine and wiggled both ways, up and down. I laughed to cover my nervousness.

"You weren't far off," I said. "You guessed eleven o'clock, didn't you?"

"That ain't my fire," Sam said stolidly. "That's probably the other one."

"What other one?"

"Didn't I tell you? The big fur-storage warehouse down on Jackson. Same night as my fire. Started in a cigar store. A guy burned up in it. A gambler guy, they said."

"Not—not the Acme Cigar Store?" I demanded, my throat going rigid inside.

"Yah, I think so. On Jackson Street."

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That was it. My cigar store. And my bookie with the little black book that said he owed me $39,000. Burned up!

Take it easy, I told myself. Relax. *That was just one of the golden eggs. Remember, boy, you own the goose.*

I glanced at the little Pritchard-Ball table model over in the corner, and another doubt assailed me. Suppose it didn't work in its new location? Just then another hell full of sirens whooped from another direction. Sam stepped to the window and looked out. "Yuhp. That's her," he said.

Bessie dropped her magazine and rushed to the window in amazement. Sam tried to explain to her how he had known about it. I heard him end up with, "You see, you can't change the future, Bessie. That's why I did not——"

But now I was down on my hands and knees trying to plug in the secondhand TV set. I had to know! At first I thought my fingers were clumsy, but then I turned the over-size plug around and looked at the prongs. They weren't parallel like ordinary prongs, and there were three of them.

I dragged Sam away from the window after barely glancing at the red flare in the sky across town. "What kind of a damned plug have you got on here?" I demanded.

"Only kind that fit my outlet," he told me. "The plug that came with the set just wouldn't go in my wall socket, but I found one in electric store."

I was about to cut off the queer plug and stick the bare wires into the outlet, when a thought exploded in my mind. Where had I seen an outlet that would fit a plug like this? I stared at the heavy-duty plug, and the printing on it jumped out at me. It read, "60-cycle, 220-volt."

In my own kitchen, that's where I'd seen such an outlet, the 220-volt outlet for our electric range.

Sam had been operating the 110-volt TV on a 220-volt circuit. *The over-load was responsible for the abnormal operation of the set.*

Bessie was so agog over the coincident of the fire that she didn't catch on, even when I dragged the electric range away from the wall and pulled out the three-pronged pigtail.

It wasn't until I had plugged in the TV and was reaching for the switch that Bessie screamed, "Don't! You'll burn

(Concluded on page 116)

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OCCUPATION FORCE

By FRANK HERBERT

When that tremendous ship from outer space appeared in the vicinity of the moon, Earth's inhabitants had a clear idea of what was in store for them: a deluge of superbombs, the landing of weird aliens out of last month's issue of Amazing Stories *to enslave what remained of the population after the holocaust. And then a scout ship swooped down to land in Washington and out stepped the conquerors, armed with the one weapon nobody had considered....*

HE WAS a long time awakening. There was a pounding somewhere. General Henry A. Llewellyn's eyes snapped open. Someone at his bedroom door. Now he heard the voice. "Sir . . . sir . . . sir . . ." It was his orderly.

"All right, Watkins, I'm awake."

The pounding ceased.

He swung his feet out of the bed, looked at the luminous dial on his alarm clock—two-twenty-five. What the devil? He slipped on a robe, a tall, ruddy-faced man—chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Watkins saluted when the general opened the door. "Sir, the President has called an emergency cabinet meeting." The orderly began to talk faster, his words running all together. "There's an alien spaceship big as Lake Erie sailing around the earth and getting ready to attack."

It took a second for the general to interpret the words. He snorted. Pulp magazine poppycock! he thought.

"Sir," said Watkins, "there is a staff car downstairs ready to take you to the White House."

"Get me a cup of coffee

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while I dress," said the general.

Representatives of five foreign nations, every cabinet officer, nine senators, fourteen representatives, the heads of the secret service, FBI and of all the armed services were at the meeting. They gathered in the conference room of the White House bomb shelter — a panelled room with paintings around the walls in deep frames to stimulate windows. General Llewellyn sat across the oak conference table from the President. The buzzing of voices in the room stopped as the President rapped his gavel. An aide stood up, gave them the first briefing.

A University of Chicago astronomer had picked up the ship at about eight p.m. It was coming from the general direction of the belt of *Orion*. The astronomer had alerted other observatories and someone had thought to notify the government.

The ship had arrowed in at an incredible rate, swung into a one-and-one-half-hour orbit around Earth. It was visible to the unaided eye by that time, another moon. Estimates put its size at nineteen miles long, twelve miles wide, vaguely egg-shaped.

Spectroscopic analysis showed the drive was a hydrogen ion stream with traces of carbon, possibly from the refractor. The invader was transparent to radar, responded to no form of communication.

Majority opinion: a hostile ship on a mission to conquer Earth.

Minority opinion: a *cautious* visitor from space.

Approximately two hours after it took up orbit, the ship put out a five-hundred-foot scout which swooped down on Boston, grappled up a man by the name of William R. Jones from a group of night workers waiting for a bus.

Some of the minority went over to the majority. The President, however, continued to veto all suggestions that they attack. He was supported by the foreign representatives who were in periodic communication with their governments.

"Look at the size of the thing," said the President. "An ant with an ant-size peashooter could attack an elephant with the same hopes of success we would have."

"There's always the possibility they're just being prudent," said a State Department aide. "We've no evidence they're dissecting this

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Were these the feared invaders from space?

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Jones from Boston, as I believe someone suggested."

"The size precludes peaceful intent," said General Llewellyn. "There's an invasion army in that thing. We should fire off every atomic warhead rocket we can lay hand to, and . . ."

The President waved a hand to silence him.

General Llewellyn sat back. His throat hurt from arguing, his hand ached from pounding the table.

At eight a.m., the spaceship detached a thousand-foot scout as it passed over the New Jersey coast. The scout drifted down over Washington, D. C. At eight-eighteen a.m., the scout contacted Washington airport in perfect English, asked for landing instructions. A startled tower operator warned the scout ship off until Army units had cleared the area.

General Llewellyn and a group of expendable assistants were chosen to greet the invaders. They were at the field by eight-fifty-one. The scout, a pale robins-egg blue, settled to a landing strip which cracked beneath it. Small apertures began flicking open and shut on the ship's surface. Long rods protruded, withdrew. After ten minutes of this, a portal opened and a ramp shot out, tipped to the ground. Again silence.

Every weapon the armed services could muster was trained on the invader. A flight of jets swept overhead. Far above them, a lone bomber circled, in its belly THE BOMB. All waited for the general's signal.

Something moved in the shadow above the ramp. Four human figures appeared at the portal. They wore striped trousers, cutaways, glistening black shoes, top hats. Their linen shone. Three carried briefcases, one had a scroll. They moved down the ramp.

General Llewellyn and aides walked out to the foot of the ramp. *They look like more bureaucrats,* thought the general.

The one with the scroll, a dark-haired man with narrow face, spoke first. "I have the honor to be the ambassador from Krolia, Loo Mogasayvidiantu." His English was faultless. He extended the scroll. "My credentials."

General Llewellyn accepted the scroll, said, "I am General Henry A. Llewellyn" — he hesitated—"representative of Earth."

The Krolian bowed. "May

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I present my staff?" He turned. "Ayk Turgotokikalapa, Min Sinobayatagurki and William R. Jones, late of Boston, Earth."

The general recognized the man whose picture was in all of the morning newspapers. *Here's our first Solar quisling,* he thought.

"I wish to apologize for the delay in our landing," said the Krolian ambassador. "Occasionally quite a long period of time is permitted to elapse between preliminary and secondary phases of a colonial program."

Colonial program! thought the general. He almost gave the signal which would unleash death upon this scene. But the ambassador had more to say.

"The delay in landing was a necessary precaution," said the Krolian. "Over such a long period of time our data sometimes becomes outmoded. We needed time for a sampling, to talk to Mr. Jones, to bring our data up to date." Again he bowed with courtly politeness.

Now General Llewellyn was confused. *Sampling . . . data . . .* He took a deep breath. Conscious of the weight of history on his shoulders, he said, "We have one question to ask you, Mr. Ambassador. Do you come as friends or conquerors?"

The Krolian's eyes widened. He turned to the Earthman beside him. "It is as I expected, Mr. Jones." His lips thinned. "That Colonial Office! Understaffed! Inefficient! Bumbling . . ."

The general frowned. "I don't understand."

"No, of course," said the ambassador. "But if our Colonial Office had kept track . . ." He waved a hand. "Look around at your people, sir."

The general looked first at the men behind the ambassador. Obviously human. At a gesture from the Krolian, he turned to the soldiers behind himself, then toward the frightened faces of the civilians behind the airport fences. The general shrugged, turned back to the Krolian. "The people of Earth are waiting for the answer to my question. Do you come as friends or conquerors?"

The ambassador sighed. "The truth is, sir, that the question really has no answer. You must surely notice that we are of the same breed."

The general waited.

"It should be obvious to you," said the Krolian, "that we have already occupied Earth . . . about seven thousand years ago." **THE END**

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THE SMASHERS

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

A weird kind of mutant was springing up in the world: normal-looking young men whose handshake broke bones and whose embrace put women in the morgue. What was the answer?

THE man in the derby hat got up from his table and went into the telephone booth. He dropped a dime and dialed and pretty soon someone at the other end picked up the receiver and said hello.

"I think I've spotted one," the man in the derby said in a calm voice.

"Good. Where are you?"

"In a restaurant at Pine and Washington."

"Is he there?"

"Yes, he's sitting at the counter."

"What makes you think he's one?"

The man in the derby frowned. "I'm not exactly an amateur at this, you know. I've spotted them before."

"You've made mistakes, too.

"Who doesn't make a mistake once in a while?"

"And even if he is one, there are other things to be taken into account."

The reply was snappish. "I know that. What are you trying to do, discourage me?"

"I'm just reminding you that positive proof is better than intuition."

"Don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing."

"Very well."

"I've got to get back now. He may leave." Derby Hat hung up and went back to his table.

The subject of the conversation was still at the counter. He was a youth of perhaps twenty-one. He had broad shoulders, thick curly blond hair and large hands. Only a keen observer could have noted that the youth differed in any way from the other people seated around the restaurant. Derby Hat fell into this category, or at least partially so. He was not particularly keen of observation, but he knew what to look for.

The first clue was that the youth was being very careful with his hands. The waitress

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Under the pull of sheer muscle, the metal began to give!

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had brought him a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich. The cream for the coffee was in a tiny bottle. The youth moved his hand toward the bottle very slowly. He grasped it between the thumb and second finger of his right hand—with exaggerated delicacy—as though it were a piece of rare Ming china. He brought it to the cup slowly and poured the cream with painful exactness and concentration. He spooned sugar into the coffee with the same studied exactness. When he put down the spoon it was with an obvious gesture of relief. It rang on the counter and the waitress glanced at the youth, questioning, as she passed. When she came back she stopped and asked, "Is there anything wrong?"

The youth looked up sullenly, guiltily. "No. Everything's all right." He had a remarkably deep, rich voice.

The youth seemed relieved when he finished his lunch. He got carefully off his stool and took a step backward as though wishing to get clear of the counter as quickly as possible. As he turned and moved forward toward the cashier, the man in the derby hat was arising from his table.

The youth took a handful of change from his pocket and laid his check on the counter before the cashier. He carefully sorted out some coins and laid them on the check. The cashier scooped the money into her palm and started sorting it into the change compartments of the register. She stopped, frowning. She held up a coin for inspection. "This quarter's bent," she said.

The youth's reaction seemed far sharper than the situation justified. His head jerked up. His eyes widened. "I'll give you a different one."

He scratched among the coins in his hand, but the cashier smiled and said, "It's all right."

The youth pocketed his change and moved toward the door and the thought in his mind was that he'd make it all right. But luck was against him. He had taken careful hold of the door handle and was pushing down the catch with a gentle thumb, when a car backfired in the street. The sound hit his taut nerves like a bow snapped against violin strings. He jerked back. There was the sound of breaking wood and ripping metal and everyone in the restaurant looked up thinking a car had crashed outside in the wake of the backfire.

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But all they saw was the half-frightened, half-defiant youth facing them in a crouch. In his fist, he held the door handle with a section of the door still clinging to it. A piece of frame had come off in a chunk with the handle, as though the door had been built out of putty and hadn't quite dried.

There was a moment of silence while everyone stared. Then the youth whirled and ran into the street. The restaurant manager had witnessed the incident and now ran forward, yelling after the youth in anger.

But at the cashier's counter, he was clumsily impeded by the bulk of the man in the derby who had come swiftly forward and had dropped both his check and a bill on the counter. Derby Hat turned on the manager. "Who you shoving?" he growled. And in turning toward the door, he was able to give the manager an accidental push that sent the latter several steps backward. Without waiting to apologize, Derby Hat left the restaurant.

Once outside, he caught sight of the youth moving up the street, hurrying, but not quite running. He set off in pursuit and caught up to the youth in the middle of the next block. He touched his arm and said, "Come on! They're after you! Here's a cab!"

The urgency in the man's voice added to the youth's confusion. He moved under slight pressure toward the curb. "No," Derby Hat said sharply. "Don't touch the handle! I'll open the door!" Then they were in the cab and it was out in traffic.

Back in the restaurant, a second man showed a tardy but nonetheless sharp interest in the youth. He was tall, very thin, middle-aged, with a studious face. At the first sound of rending material, he had sprung from his stool and rushed forward. But the manager and Mr. Derby Hat and others had gotten in his way so that when he reached the street, he was unable to catch sight of the youth.

When he went back inside he found the manager holding the door handle, staring at it in red-faced anger.

"May I see that?"

The manager handed it over. "Are you a policeman?"

"No. My name is Arthur Forrest. I'm a physics professor at the University." He studied the smashed door-section with sharp interest.

The manager was on the

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verge of asking what the hell right had he to horn in. But common sense prevailed. "Damned young vandals!" he growled. "Come along and wreck a man's property!"

"Do you think he did it purposely?" Forrest asked.

"Why, certainly! How else would a kid tear a door apart?"

"I thought it might have been an accident."

"Accident! You think that door's made of cardboard? It was just pure viciousness."

"Could you have torn that handle out? Even if you'd been so inclined?"

"Of course not!"

"Then how—?"

The manager was too angry for logic. "A flaw in the wood. Who knows how? Some of those kids are strong. The main thing is that the door's wrecked and the cops better do something about it!"

"I imagine they'll make every effort," Forrest said.

As he walked south after leaving the restaurant, his expression was vague with thought. He passed unheeding from the business section onto the green, shaded campus of State University. He entered Carmel Hall and emerged from his preoccupation only when Steffi Markham, his assistant, looked up and smiled and said, "Wake up, Professor. You're home."

Steffi Markham was big as a minute, brown as a two-month suntan, as smart as they came. She was filled with energy and common sense, and that which made men turn to look even before they realized she was beautiful. She had graduated at the head of her class two years previously and had stayed on as Arthur Forrest's assistant.

Forrest jerked his head up sharply. "Eh? Oh, yes. Quite right."

Steffi laughed. "You've got everything the absent-minded professor should have except the frowsy appearance."

"I think I found one," Forrest said.

"One what?"

"One of those juveniles."

"No!"

"Yes. I was having a sandwich at Marvin's when a young man tore the handle off the door."

"Good heavens! What was he angry about?"

"I don't think he was angry at all. I think he was confused—and scared. He ran. I followed, but lost him."

"I'd be scared too if I tore someone's door to pieces."

"I'd certainly have liked to lay hands on him."

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"Don't worry. The police will probably do it for you."

"I don't think you're very sympathetic toward my idea, Steffi."

She looked at him with just the hint of a smile in her eyes. Their relationship had never been completely that of chief and assistant. Steffi, of course, acknowledged her lesser talents and obeyed instructions, but they tended to treat each other as equals. Steffi said, "It's not that I'm out of sympathy. I just feel you're—well, being unscientific—putting the finished product before the construction thereof. If you know what I mean."

Forrest knew very well what she meant, but chose to appear dense. "I don't think I do."

Steffi frowned. "Well, from my point of view, it's this way. Some thirty years ago, they exploded the first atom bomb over a Japanese city. Since then, they've popped a lot more. There have been no wars, thank God, but the experimental explosions by both the United States and Russia have beyond doubt contaminated the atmosphere."

"Correct."

"You agree with other scientists that no great damage has as yet been done, but they certainly don't agree with *you* as to what you think is happening as a result of this atmospheric contamination."

"Must you spell all this out? Forrest asked with some show of irritation.

"Just wanted to see if I had it right," Steffi said primly. As a matter of fact, she took a certain satisfaction out of annoying Forrest. Probably Freud could have explained why. "Your theory is that nature," Steffi went on, "is already making an effort to combat Mankind's stupidity."

"I believe," Forrest cut in, "that it would be far harder to depopulate the earth—by any means—than people imagine. Nature is a funny old lady. She cares little for customs, habits, man-made rules of morality, the higher standards of civilization. She wants only to manifest life forms. Nature hates a sterile vacuum. She spawns a billion eggs to produce a million salmon or less. All through the history of creation, she has left a margin of overage to allow for typhoons and earthquakes and epidemics and wars so far as the human race is concerned. Nature's first idea is to *populate*. Therefore, is it reasonable to assume she will sit back and allow Man to annihilate himself with a few poisonous breezes?"

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"Knowing the potentials of atomic fission as we do, I fail to see what the old girl can do about it if we decide to really cut loose."

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong. Nature has far more resources than you give her credit for. Did the Black Plague depopulate Europe? Has Nature ever failed to build up human immunity to any destroyer before it was able to annihilate life?"

"I'll grant you that, Professor, but it's from this point that we move in different directions. I feel you're wrong in thinking Nature has already gone to work on radiation poisoning. I don't think it's reasonable to assume that she would start combating a problem before that problem actually came into being. After all, at the present moment there have been very few deaths from radiation poisoning. Nature can't possibly know any danger exists until her lovely little progeny start dropping off like flies. I'll grant you, theoretically, that when that happens, Nature may possibly do something. But I'm sure she hasn't done anything to date."

"Clearly, long-windedly, and erroneously put," Forrest said. "I'm certain she's doing something right now and I hope I'm on the track of what it is."

"In the meantime, there are classes to be taught," Steffi said. "I have the notes ready that you asked for."

"Fine. After my lecture this afternoon, I won't be available."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to drop down and talk to the Commissioner of Police."

After jockeying the young man into the cab, Mr. Derby Hat got in beside him and gave the driver an address in the lower part of town. "Hurry," he said. He turned to the young man and smiled. "Everything's going to be all right. I'll see that the cops don't get you."

The young man turned and looked at him closely for the first time. "Who are you?"

"My name is Wiley—Tony Wiley. I work for a man named Carson. I want you to meet him."

"Why?"

"Because I think you can do each other some good. It's as simple as that. By the way—what's your name, son?"

"Jerry Taylor. In what way can I do your boss any good?"

Tony Wiley took off his derby and wiped his bald head with a snowy handkerchief.

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"I'd think you'd be more interested in what he can do for you."

There was a sullen hopelessness in the youth's attitude. Even though he had asked questions, his manner indicated the answers were not very important to him. "All right—tell me."

Wiley noted his mood and attitude with satisfaction. "Why not wait until you talk to him? He could tell you more than I can. That's where we're headed now—" Wiley cast a sidelong glance at his new charge. "—that is—if it's okay with you."

Jerry Taylor shrugged. "What have I got to lose?"

"That's the attitude," Wiley said heartily.

"Don't touch me as we get out of the cab, though."

"Why not?" Wiley asked.

"I'm liable to break you in two." There was no animosity in the words, nor did Wiley take offense. He smiled and put his hat back on.

A half-hour's drive got them through heavy traffic and into a dirty dead-end street in the slums where the driver pulled up in front of an ancient red-brick building with an old-fashioned archway entrance. "This is it," Wiley said.

Jerry followed him through the archway and up a flight of dimly lit stairs. Even though it was bright midday, the hall lights were on. They climbed five flights before Wiley opened a door and motioned Jerry inside.

The room was brightly lit and reasonably well furnished. There was a reception desk with no one behind it and a red-haired youth napping on a lounge. As Wiley entered, the youth opened his eyes and sat up.

Simultaneously, a rear door opened and a tall dark man entered. He had a broad face and a sober air. Suitably clad, he could have passed for an undertaker. But there was power behind the somber eyes as they settled on Jerry.

Wiley said, "This is the lad, Frank." Then to Jerry: "I want you to meet Mr. Hayden. He's the man I told you about. Frank, this is Jerry Taylor."

Hayden moved forward and laid a hand on Jerry's shoulder. "Welcome, son. I'm glad you came. Step into my office if you'll be so kind and we'll have a little talk."

He turned toward the office, then stopped and indicated the red-headed youth. "Oh, this is Tom Ames—Jerry Taylor."

Tom Ames got up from the lounge and extended his hand.

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Jerry half-raised his own, then jerked it down and took a backward step.

Hayden smiled and said, "No—no. It's quite all right. You can shake hands with Tom."

The latter stood with a slight smile on his face, his hand still extended. He said, "It's all right, pal. I won't break."

Jerry hesitated another moment, then shrugged and reached out and took Tom's hand. As he did so, a look of surprise came over his face. His eyes opened wide as Tom shook heartily. Jerry turned bewildered eyes on Hayden.

The latter smiled and said, "That was just to show you that you're among friends—your own kind. Shall we go in now?"

The inner office was somewhat better furnished. Hayden sat down behind an elaborately carved, old-fashioned desk and indicated a chair.

After Jerry was seated, there was a moment of silence—a time of mutual measuring—after which Hayden said, "They've given you a pretty hard time, haven't they, son?"

Jerry opened his mouth to speak, but Hayden raised a hand. "In order to save time, let me tell you about yourself. I think it would be better than asking you a lot of questions since I already have the answers."

Jerry regarded him in sullen silence.

"This trouble of yours—this terrific strength—developed sometime after your eighteenth birthday."

Jerry's mouth opened. "How in hell did you know—?"

Hayden again raised his hand. "Please don't interrupt. It was a bewildering thing, this strength. And so hard to define that even you were unable to tell yourself what it really was."

Hayden stared at the ceiling and put the tips of his fingers together. "It *was* strength of course, but different from the kind an athlete gets from body and muscle building. You found that it could not be as easily controlled. An athlete with strong fingers is able to pick up a fragile china cup for instance, because he knows it is fragile and treats it with corresponding gentleness. Thus his strength is not a liability because he has no difficulty in keeping it under control. But in your case—"

Hayden paused, then pointed to a metal cigarette box on the desk. He said, "Pick that box up, Jerry."

The latter raised his hand.

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He moved it forward very slowly giving the impression of a paralytic trying to force movement into his arm.

Hayden said, "No—no. Forget your restraint. I care nothing for the box. Just reach out naturally and pick it up."

An odd, wistful light came into Jerry's eyes; a light swiftly interpreted by Hayden. And he likened the youth to a strong man who had been kept for a long time in a strait-jacket. Now the strait-jacket had been removed and the man was being told, "You are no longer imprisoned. Go ahead and stretch your tortured muscles. Hit the wall. Break something with that long-pentup strength that you have."

Hayden leaned forward. "Pick it up, Jerry."

The youth reached forth eagerly and snatched up the case. His fingers sank into the metal as though it were bread dough. The box collapsed as from being squeezed in a vise. Jerry raised his eyes and smiled at Hayden.

The man smiled back. "That was fun, wasn't it?"

Jerry nodded wordlessly and slowly rolled the cigarette box into a metal ball.

An unknowing observer might have thought it strange that this youth, previously so hostile and sullen, could suddenly react like a lost dog given a friendly pat. But Hayden could have explained it.

In truth, Jerry Taylor *was little* more than a lost dog in a world that had turned on him; a world that no longer understood him. Now he had found a friend; a friend who understood what had come upon him. Thus, his quick trust and gratitude was logical.

Sensing his thoughts Hayden said, "We just want you to know you aren't alone in this thing. There are quite a few others."

"Tom Ames, out there?"

Hayden nodded. "And more. Some much less fortunate than you yourself."

"I don't understand. What do you mean—less fortunate?"

"You haven't killed anyone have you? Or crippled anyone?"

Jerry shook his head, with no way of knowing that Hayden would have much preferred an answer in the affirmative. Hayden said, "Mel Davis, one of our boys, had an argument with his father one evening. His father laid hands on him. Mel instinctively resisted and broke his father's

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back. He ran away—terrorized—to become a fugitive."

"Good Lord!"

"The police would have you believe that another—Joseph Kane—murdered his sweetheart. But what really happened was that they parked in the moonlight one night. Joseph took the girl in his arms and kissed her. A single kiss, but when he released her, she was lifeless, her face smashed."

These revelations shook Jerry. They made him remember his own close shaves. "Did the police—?"

"Joseph fled in panic. He had done nothing wrong. It was an accident, but would he have been able to convince the authorities? He was planning to give himself up, but we contacted him and persuaded him to join us."

Jerry frowned. "I don't quite get it. What is this? Some kind of a club? What do you do?"

Hayden smiled. "We steal," he said quietly.

Commissioner of Police Joiner looked at Professor Forrest through the smoke of a cigar and said, "The newspaper accounts do not reveal the true facts concerning the crimes, Professor. Take that currency exchange robbery for instance. The news story stated that the safe was cut out of the cement foundation, lifted on a truck with a block and tackle, and hauled away."

"But that wasn't the case?" Forrest's question was not really a question at all, but a reflection of his own certainty.

"No, we think not. The safe was *torn* out of the wall. And there was no way in the world that either a block and tackle or a truck could have been used in that location."

"Then the safe was ripped from its moorings and carried away by hand?"

"I won't admit that, even though we found shoe-prints actually sunk a thirty-second of an inch into the hardwood floor—perfect outlines. I won't admit it because I refuse to concede either a human being or an animal could lift a three-thousand-pound safe."

"The safe was found later, was it not?"

"Yes."

"The door cut out?"

"The door was torn from its hinges. As I said, Professor, the press accounts are erroneous because even reporters are realists. They refuse to believe—or report—the impossible, even though they see the evidence."

"I always thought facts indicated truth."

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Commissioner Joiner did not care to discuss it. He said, "Of course we would be grateful for any help you could give us." But he spoke as though he did not take the possibility of such help as very likely.

"I don't know whether I can or not—"

"You said you had a theory."

"I have, but I'm afraid you would label it as being utterly fantastic."

"I'd like to hear it just the same—if you care to tell me. . . ."

". . . So that's the setup," Frank Hayden said, "I've made a point of being perfectly honest with you. I don't know how you boys acquired this phenomenal strength, but I know a good thing when I see it. We use that strength to operate outside the law. We are criminals in the broad sense but the boys do not look at it quite that way. They see themselves pushed away from society by a force that they did not ask for—a situation they did not request. Through sheer accident, while attempting to conform, they could easily land in jail; they could accidently kill and face execution. So they've decided to fight the society that rejects them. They feel they have nothing to lose."

"How many of—of our kind have you contacted?"

"Thirteen."

"Are they all members of the club?"

"No, only five. Some decided to either go it alone as social outcasts or to conform as best they can. I'm afraid they will all come to disaster in one way or another."

Jerry straightened to relieve a cramped leg. As he did so, his knee struck the corner of the desk. There was the sound of splintering wood. His reaction was of quick guilt.

Hayden smiled sympathetically. "That's quite all right. The desk is old."

"Thanks," Jerry muttered, his sullenness returning. He doubled his fist and held it up and looked at it. "If I could only explain it to them—make them understand."

"But they wouldn't understand."

"No."

"And you couldn't explain it."

Jerry looked up quickly. "How did you know—?"

"It would be the same as undressing in the middle of the street and crying out, 'Come and see! Come and look me over. I'm naked!' " Hay-

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den's words sprang from personal knowledge of a phenomenon concerning these tormented youths. Shame, he had discovered, was an elemental part of their affliction. When they discussed it with him, they reacted like persons reluctantly revealing sexual depravities.

Jerry shrugged, "You're right. It's just—just—"

"Let's not talk about it." Hayden got up and rounded the desk and put a hand on Jerry's shoulder. "The boys will be coming in. I want you to meet them. Take your time. Get acquainted. We want you to be happy here."

Commissioner Joiner studied Professor Forrest thoughtfully. "I get your point and I'm not one to sneer at any man's theory. But it strikes me as being entirely apart from these fantastic robberies."

"But not apart from the people who are committing them."

"I still don't get it."

"It's a little hard to explain. I could be a thousand percent wrong because I'm working blind. I've taken a human phenomenon that I'm not certain really exists—by that, I mean I haven't actually contacted one—and worked back to a theory which also has no basis in proof."

Joiner made a helpless gesture.

"It's like an alien brain knowing our need of a system of mathematics, but nothing else about it," Forrest said. "With that slim knowledge he'd hardly be likely to come up with the system we use with nothing more to go on than sheer logic."

"I think you've got something there."

"But I'm personally sure of this. Evidence indicates some persons of physical strength such as we cannot even conceive, are manifesting that strength in a most spectacular manner. Therefore these persons must exist. I'm sure they do and that their physical power is an accident; something produced by an evolutional effort that set out to produce something entirely different."

"Do you think evolution produced this other thing?"

"Until I can contact one of these individuals, I'll have no way of knowing."

"I can assure you that no strange people are lurking around town."

"How can you be so sure."

"We have policemen. They aren't smart enough to solve crimes the way Sherlock

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Holmes did—by sitting in an armchair and deducing—few cops are. They depend mainly on informers. Every cop worth his salt has a number of these pigeons who keep him informed. They prowl the underworld and believe me they know who's in town, what's going on, who's planning it."

"And the informers haven't helped you?"

"Not in the least."

"Maybe you're asking the wrong people."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe these persons are so well camouflaged that even underworld regulars have no knowledge of their whereabouts."

"Do you think you could find them?"

"I'd like to try."

"How would you go about it?"

Forrest smiled somewhat ruefully. "Commissioner, I'd rather keep that to myself because I could be wrong and I think I've expounded enough ideas that sound foolish."

Joiner considered the Professor. He'd heard them called egg-heads, impractical dreamers. But they'd also produced the atom bomb and you couldn't call that impractical. Thus he had reserved judgment on men of Forrest's type. "Do you mean you want to be deputized?" he asked.

"Oh no. I'm just going to wander around on my own, in entirely legal manner. I won't pose as a policeman. But the reason I came to see you was so you'd know who I was. So I'd have someone to get in touch with quickly if I need help."

"Call me any time," Joiner said. "I'll be happy to hear from you." He wasn't buying anything, but neither would he act as an obstructionist.

Professor Forrest got up to leave. "Thank you. Maybe you'll hear from me."

"And possibly," Joiner said, "I'd better have some triple-thick handcuffs made in case you turn up any of these characters."

Forrest grinned. "Now you're kidding me, Commissioner."

"Maybe," Joiner said glumly. "But take a run down to the crime lab and look at that safe with the door torn off. It's awfully hard to laugh at a thing like that."

Central Avenue from Muller Street to 87th was the turf of the Royal Dukes. The Glen Hill section. The Dukes numbered around twenty-five —one had been killed in a

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rumble with the Silver Jets and two proudly bore scars of wounds that had hospitalized them. Mack Sargent was the leader of the Dukes by virtue of a year in reform school and his ability to engineer successful operations.

Sargent and four of the Dukes were killing time in front of the drug store at Central and 68th, when Muggo nudged the leader and said, "There he is again."

Perch Head, quick with knife or fist, scowled and said "Let's take the bastid in the alley and rough 'im. He's been hangin' around too much."

Mack said, "Aw, he's all right. Besides we may be able to use him sometime."

"He's a damn snoop."

"A cop maybe," Tiny Olsen said.

"No, he ain't no cop."

Muggo spat on the sidewalk. "I'm going over to the clubhouse. Anybody want to shoot some craps?"

"That's for me," Perch Head said.

The Dukes rounded the corner and disappeared toward their basement clubhouse, leaving Mack Sargent with his heel still hooked over the cornerstone of the building. He was still standing thus when Arthur Forrest stopped beside him and said hello.

"Hi," Sargent replied.

Forrest looked in the direction the Dukes had gone. "Seems I'm not very popular," he said, grinning.

Sargent eyed him levelly. "They don't like you. Some of them think maybe you're a cop."

"But you know different."

"You've told me different."

"But you don't believe me?"

"I don't think you're a cop, but you're after something."

"You know I mean no harm to the gang. I've proved that."

"Uh-huh, I guess so. But don't change the subject. What are you after?"

Forrest paused, wondering if he dared talk. Did he have Sargent's confidence? He'd been hanging around for two weeks now—insinuating himself into the group—taking insults good-naturedly—handing out money and allowing himself to be marked as a soft touch. But had it been a long enough time? And did Sargent know anything to make the time worthwhile?

"Yes," Forrest said, "There is something I want."

"What?"

"Information."

Mack Sargent froze. "You got a lot of crust—nosing in here and—"

"I'm not a cop, Mack. I want the information for my

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own use. Giving it to me wouldn't hurt you a bit. It might help you."

"Help me? How?"

"By getting rid of somebody you're afraid of."

Mack bristled. "I ain't afraid of—!"

"Oh yes you are. All the guys are."

"Who you talking about?"

"The gang nobody discusses—that nobody will talk about directly; only by veiled reference—and always with obvious fear."

Sargent looked at Forrest for a long time. "You mean the Smashers?"

A sudden feeling of elation went through Forrest but he strove not to show it. "What did I tell you? I've been hanging around two weeks and that's the first time I ever heard their name."

"You been hanging around too long," Sargent said sullenly.

"But you do know something about them."

Sargent kept taking his time between replies. He finally said, "Look, you got me in kind of a spot."

"I—"

"Shut up and listen. I'm the leader of the Dukes, see? And it takes brains to stay the leader. I got to look out for their welfare. I got to use my head."

"I think you do a pretty good job."

"Will you shut up? Now this is how you got me in a spot. None of the gang like you and one of these days Muggo or Perch Head's going to haul off and swing a club or maybe a knife. They don't want you around."

"You wouldn't want to see me get knifed?"

"I wouldn't care if you got busted in two with a building as long as none of the gang's connected with it. Right now we're hot as hell. The cops are just looking for something like a guy knifed in an alley. So I got to keep them out of trouble 'til things cool down."

"That's smart."

"And I can't do it with you around."

"I told you what I was after, Mack."

"Okay, if I tell you what I know about the Smashers will you breeze and quit hanging around?"

"That's all I've been waiting for."

Mack considered sullenly. Was the guy telling the truth? Maybe. He said, "Let's go get a cup of coffee."

In a back booth at Labriola's Coffee Shop, Sargent

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was still sullen, but he said, "All right. What do you want to know?"

"All that you know about the Smashers."

"One of 'em's a red-head. Another's a blond guy. Nobody ever sees them though. They're a real small outfit and they got brains behind them."

"If no one ever sees them, how do you know about the red-head and the blond?"

"There was a kid hurt—maybe you heard about it—a member of the Eagles."

"That lad who got hit by a truck—hit and run—it seems to me he belonged to the Eagles."

"That was the kid, but he wasn't hit by no truck."

"But the cops picked him up before he died. That was what he told them."

"He was tough. He lied to the cops but he told his leader the truth. He was walking down Abrams Avenue one night and saw this red-head and blond slip into an alley. He followed them and listened. The blond guy was new and the red-head was showing him the ropes or at least that's how the kid figured it. They were casing the back door of a jewelry store on Abrams and the kid got too close and the red-head grabbed him." Sargent lifted his coffee cup.

"And killed him?"

"The leader of the Eagles told me how the kid was busted up. His hand was smashed like it had been put in a vise. His ribs were smashed and both arms broken. The kid swore to his leader that he got that way from the red-head picking him up and carrying him out of the alley."

"And the police put it down as a hit-and-run driver."

"How else could they put it down? A kid busted up like that? They had to as long as there wasn't any gorillas loose from any circus. The Eagle leader and some of the gang found the kid and he told the leader what really happened. Then the cops come. The kid told them the hit-and-run thing before he died."

"Why didn't the leader tell them the truth?"

Sargent gave Forrest a withering glance. "Nobody stools to the cops no matter what happens. The Eagles'll even it up."

"You think so?"

Sargent waited a long time before answering. Then he spoke sullenly. "Uh-uh. I don't think so. You don't fool around with guys like that—crazy guys."

"Is that the actual name of the gang—the Smashers?"

"Uh-uh. They got no name.

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For all we know, they ain't even a gang. That's just what the other gangs call them."

"Where can I find the Smashers, Sargent?"

"What do you want of 'em?"

"Look, you said you'd tell *me*."

"I don't know, but I've got kind of a hunch their headquarters is down in the river district past the University."

"And that's all you can tell me?"

"That's all. Now will you for crissake get lost and stay away from the Dukes?"

"Sure, I will, Mack." Forrest took a wallet from his pocket and extracted a bill. "Take this. Buy the Dukes some gym equipment—boxing gloves—things like that."

Sargent took the bill, grinning. "Thanks, I'll buy some tiddly-winks."

Steffi Markham watched Professor Forrest pace up and down the office. "So you've gotten exactly nowhere," she said.

"I wouldn't exactly say that. But I certainly haven't racked up much of a score."

"Frankly, I can't see why you're so concerned—why you're going to all this trouble. Law enforcement is the business of the police. They'll pick those hoodlums up eventually. Then you can talk to your blond lad."

"It might be too late then." Forrest turned suddenly. "If you could have seen him in that restaurant, Steffii; as he stood there with that door handle in his hand. I'm convinced, now that the man in the derby hat was more alert than I. That he had his eye on the boy and went after him. If I'd only been a little faster."

"All the time you've spent in the river district. It hasn't gotten you a thing?"

"Oh, but it has. I'm sure I saw him twice. Once on River Street and once in Black Rock Park. But he vanished both times. He seemed almost to have a sixth sense. He certainly couldn't have known I was stalking him."

Steffi smiled. "You probably aren't the most adroit stalker in the world. What does the boy look like?"

"He's about six feet tall. His hair is very thick. It comes to a widow's peak and parts to the left. It has a very deep wave that goes across the top of his head. He has blue eyes."

"I'd think the police would find him from that description."

"I don't want to ask the police—yet."

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"Why?"

"Several reasons. It wouldn't be fair to ask them to pick him up without telling them what they would be up against. And if I told them, they wouldn't believe me. If he reacted to arrest as I think he would, someone could easily be killed."

"It's a fascinating problem, Professor, but I'm afraid I must remind you of dull routine things—like your morning lecture."

"Ah, yes," Forrest sighed. "The morning lecture."

"By the way. I'd like the afternoon off."

"Certainly. Take all the time you need. Going shopping?"

"In a way. I may need tomorrow and the next day, too."

But Professor Forrest had left for the lecture hall.

That afternoon found Steffi Markham on a bench in Black Rock Park. She read Toynbee's latest book until dusk, then she went home.

The following afternoon she tried something light off the best-seller list and found it boring; so, the next afternoon she went back to Toynbee. On the following day the book, having served its purpose, was left at home.

Jerry Taylor walked briskly down River Street, and regardless of the weight on his mind, his spirits insisted on remaining high.

Things had been both better and worse during the previous month. Jerry had become fully acquainted with the role into which Hayden expected him to fit. He was aware also of the ultimate end it would lead to, but he preferred not to think about that.

Hayden had been far more patient and understanding than Jerry had expected him to be. Two jobs had been pulled since the day Wiley had found him in the restaurant, but Hayden had not asked Jerry to participate. In fact, Jerry got the feeling Hayden would have denied him a role even if he'd asked. Hayden said there was plenty of time; that a man should acclimate slowly to a new situation.

In his bitterness, Jerry had no qualms against breaking the law. He had wanted to strike back at society for a long time and Hayden was showing him a way to do it; a way to fight.

Jerry had one load on his conscience, however; the boy Tom Ames killed. He'd gone to the jewelry store with Ames—a dry run the night before the job—and the kid

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had come into the alley. Jerry was sure his death had been an accident, that Ames had only meant to keep him quiet. When they got to the street and Tom laid the boy down, Jerry had been sure he was dead. Otherwise he would have never run away. Or would he? He did not think so at least. It hit him hard to read the following day that the boy lived for almost a half an hour.

But the death had been an accident, damn it! If anyone on earth could understand a thing like that, it was Jerry Taylor.

Now he was entering Black Rock Park and everything vanished from his mind except the girl on the bench. His eyes lighted as he saw her there; small petite—one in a million.

He still marveled at how wonderfully and casually it had happened. He had passed her bench at just the right moment. He had looked over and she had raised her eyes at precisely the same instant. If lucky chance had not dictated this miracle, they might never have met. He shuddered at the possibility—not knowing how many times Steffi's eyes had been raised; how many times they had been hastily lowered again; how many wolves she had brushed off. Ah, lucky chance!

Steffi looked up and smiled as he approached and he forced from his mind the cold thought of how dangerous and foolish this was. All he allowed himself to think of was that she was there and he could see her once more before he made a decision. That decision would of course be to vanish. It had to be that way. But not now.

Steffi smiled and held out her hand. "Jerry! I thought you'd stood me up."

He sat down, carefully leaving a space between them. "I'm not late." He raised the palm of one hand until Steffi's hand rested on it. Then he very gently laid his other open palm on top and lowered her hand to her knee where he gently slid his hands away. When the manipulation was successfully accomplished, he sighed inwardly with relief. Even so gentle a move as that was risky. He could have squeezed her hand cruelly and brought a cry of pain.

Steffi said, "You always do that. Is it the old college grip or something?"

"The latest thing in hep circles, angel."

"Well, I certainly want to be hep."

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"Would you like to take a walk?"

"No, let's just sit and talk."

"Okay, if you'll let me take you to dinner afterwards."

"My appetite's tremendous. Have you got a lot of money?"

"I can always wash dishes."

"Without breaking them?"

She saw his jaw stiffen and his face turn slightly pale. She laid a quick hand on his doubled fist. "Darling, did I say something?"

He forced a smile and regained his composure remarkably well. "Of course not. A twinge. My old trouble coming back."

Steffi smiled back and laid her hand on his bicep. "You're very strong, darling."

"Let's not talk about that. Tell me more about you."

"Why, Jerry! My modesty. I've only known you three days." There was a teasing tone in her voice but he did not react with lightness. His face was serious when he said:

"That's right—three days. Two sessions on this bench and one walk. But it's more than that and you know it, Steffi. Don't you? You know it could just as well have been three years."

"Jerry—you're so serious."

"I mean to be." He knew he was a fool dancing in the dark but he could not help himself. Oh, sure, he would walk away when the time came. Maybe this was the last meeting. He'd eventually get up courage to break a date and that would be the end of it. But now—this moment—it meant something. "I mean to be serious and I want you to start talking."

"I'm just an ordinary girl. I came to the University from Coleman, a little town upstate. I majored in physics and because I'm such a smarty I was picked as assistant to one of the professors. A very great honor."

"Ordinary, huh? How many out of a class get picked for jobs like that?"

"I was lucky, but how about you? I want to hear everything."

"Are you really interested?"

"You know I am."

"There isn't much to tell. My—my folks are dead. I've just been knocking around—Come on, let's take a walk. If I sit here any longer, I'll be putting my hands on you."

"Would that be bad?" Steffi asked softly.

"You've no idea how bad, angel. Come on."

After Jerry left her at the door of the sorority house, Steffi sat in the dark for a

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long time. A feeling of panic —so very faint at first—had now flamed up until it was something to contend with. Why hadn't she told Professor Forrest the first day? Why hadn't she gone to him and said, "I've found your boy, Professor. You come down to Black Rock Park tomorrow and I'll make him hold still while you talk to him." That had been her impulse and her plan, but the last moment she'd held her tongue. What harm was there in delaying it for a day? He was a nice boy. At the time she would not admit he was anything more. Just a nice boy and she'd wanted one more afternoon alone with him. The second night, she was frightened. Well, not exactly that. Her emotions had been a mixture of fright and happiness. She had heard that love came in that manner: sudden, hard, undeniable. But she'd never believed it. Now she knew it was true because she was in love and no matter what this blond lad turned out to be, it wouldn't make any difference.

She had stood there with him on the steps aching to be drawn into his arms. But he had made no motion. He had stood stiff and motionless, seemingly frozen, apparently deliberately restraining himself; and an arrow of fear had gone through Steffi. There was a reason Jerry held back. And in her heart, she knew Professor Forrest was right. This boy was *not* like other boys. He was different. Something special.

But terrible? Never! Steffi blotted the thought from her mind as she fled upstairs to bed.

Tomororw, she'd *make* him kiss her.

Tom Ames was stretched on the lounge as Jerry entered the outer office. He opened his eyes and said, "Hayden wants to see you."

"What for?"

"How do I know? Better go in and find out."

Hayden was pouring over a map of the city as Jerry went through the inner door. He looked up and smiled. "Sit down, son."

Jerry dropped into a chair and Hayden folded the map and put it into his drawer. He continued to smile as he asked, "Well, son, how do you like us? Have you been treated well here?"

"I haven't any complaints," Jerry said.

"Except perhaps that the time drags a little with no assignments to carry out?"

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"I manage to fill in my time."

"So I've been told."

"What do you mean by that?"

There was a touch of hostility in Jerry's tone, but Hayden refused to ruffle. "Well, your trips to Black Rock Park for one thing. The cute little girl you meet there."

Jerry sprang to his feet. "Now, listen! If you've been putting spies on my trail—"

Hayden hardened instantly. "Don't bark at me, Jerry. I've done nothing to deserve it from you."

Jerry lowered his eyes. Hayden *had* been pretty decent. "I just don't like being spied on."

"We haven't been spying on you in the sense you think. I have no criticism of your conduct. In fact, I'm glad you took up with the girl."

"It isn't anything serious."

"I'm sure of that. I know that you're well aware such entanglements can cause disaster. You boys, of necessity, must learn to lead lonely lives. But the fact remains, I'm glad you took up with the girl."

"Why?"

"Do you know who she is?"

"Of course. Her name is Steffi Markham. She works at the University."

"For whom?"

"Why—why some professor or other. She's his secretary."

"The professor's name is Arthur Forrest. He teaches physics. This girl is more than a secretary to him."

Jerry sprang to his feet. "Now listen here, Hayden—"

The latter was surprised. "So that's the way it is? Well, no matter. I wasn't implying that there is anything wrong in their relationship. I merely meant that she is very close to him—has his confidence."

"What do you care? Why is that important to you?"

"Because of one small point. The university is quite a wealthy one. Heavily endowed. They are in possession of a slab of duranium—quite a sizable hunk, as the stuff goes."

"So—?"

"Forrest has access to the duranium. Miss Markham has access to Forrest."

Jerry eased slowly back into his chair.

"And you," Hayden finished, "have access to Miss Markham."

"You're planning to swipe the duranium?"

"My mind," Hayden said delicately, "has a tendency to run in that general direction."

"And I'm the wedge that

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opens the door through Steffi and sets it up."

"Again you've hit the nail on the head."

Jerry's first reaction was one of hot indignation. Then he caught himself. Had he any right to blaze back at Hayden? The man had taken him in. He had accepted Hayden's protection and hospitality—and his money. He had done this knowing that there would have to be a payoff of some sort. After all, Hayden was not in the business of extending charity.

Hayden was watching Jerry keenly—completely aware of what was going on in his mind. There had been nothing haphazard in the way he'd handled this boy and now he knew exactly the right thing to say. He smiled with casual easiness and said, "I believe in proceding slowly, son. It's bad to rush into things. So you take your time and don't rush. Get the information we need from the girl, but do it carefully. She must not suspect. Begin by pointing yourself in the direction of our objective and start thinking along those lines."

"I see."

"There's no need of my telling you the information we need. You know that as well as I do."

"I think I do."

"Then get onto it and report back to me as soon as you get the thing lined up and we'll go over it together."

"All 'right." Jerry got up and walked to the door.

Hayden was still smiling when he turned. Hayden said, "Don't take too long, son. We can all use the money."

After leaving the building, Jerry stood for a long time on the sidewalk, staring into space. After a while, he began walking. He walked and the time passed and half an hour before his date with Steffi, he made up his mind.

He had to tell someone about this awful affliction that had come upon him. Someone who would listen with sympathy and understanding. Thus would he turn away from Hayden and all the man represented. The telling would be hard and as a result the decision had been a hard one to make, but now that it was done he felt better. He straightened his shoulders and headed directly for Black Rock Park.

Steffi was waiting and dusk was just falling as he arrived at the bench. She held out her hand and he took it very gently, concentrating on the act and drawing a breath of relief

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when she drew the hand back unharmed.

He started to sit down beside her, but she sprang up and pushed him back. "Oh, no," she said. "Not tonight. We're going for a ride."

"Dinner?"

"Later maybe. My car is over there."

He got in beside her and they rode in silence until he asked, "Tell me what you've been doing all day."

"Boring things. Unimportant."

"Anything you do is important to me."

She gaily laughed. "You're sweet," she said. "Do you have to sit way over there?"

"I—I wouldn't want to crowd you while you're driving."

"Well, today the Professor I work for gave a lecture on the properties of radio-active materials."

"Like duranium?"

"That's one of them."

"I understand they've got some duranium at the college."

"You bet we have. Not many people have even heard of this element. It's very valuable. Where did you hear about it?"

"Around," he said vaguely. "Sounds like dangerous stuff to fuss around with."

"That it is."

"I hope you stay away from it."

She laughed and turned the car into a road that ran through South Park, that thickly wooded section where lovers went.

"It isn't anything you take out and handle. Ours is in the safe on the south wall of the physics lab in the west wing. And not just in the safe, either. It's always kept in a lead box that's mounted on wheels. When we take it out, we—"

"Don't tell me!" Jerry said, suddenly.

Steffi had just braked the car and she looked over at him in surprise. "Why—of course I won't if—" She gave him a small, nervous laugh. "I told you my day was boring."

But her eyes questioned anxiously and Jerry felt called upon to say something. "Didn't mean to be sharp. It's just that I'm not interested in such things—not when I'm with you. You're the one I want to hear about. I only mentioned the stuff because I don't want you to be around it. Too dangerous."

Her eyes grew serious and she moved closer to him and laid a hand on his arm. She felt him cringe away. She

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said, "Jerry—Jerry—is there something on your mind? Something you want to tell me?"

"There's something I want to tell you very much. But I don't even know how to begin."

She let him grope for words he couldn't find; let him grope for a while, then said, "Jerry, do you love me?"

He turned his beseeching face full upon her. "You know damn well I do! You know that all I want to do is take you in my arms and hold you forever! Steffi—Steffi! I love you so much it hurts!"

She answered very quietly. "Then why don't you take me in your arms and kiss me until the hurt goes away. I love you too, darling, and I'm sitting here waiting to be kissed."

"But baby—you don't understand."

"No, but I will if you tell me. Is there some other girl you're obligated to?"

"No—nothing like that."

"Then it's something else. What, Jerry? Tell me—please tell me. No matter what it is—no matter what you've done, I'll understand."

He sat there cursing himself, cursing his timidity, the shame that rose in him, blocking his words.

Steffi said, "Are you a crim—are you wanted by the police, Jerry?"

"No, not yet. But damn it to hell, Steffi! Do you know what I was planning to do—what I was supposed to do?"

"Tell me."

"I came here to get information about the University's duranium so we can steal it!" Steffi said nothing and he leaned closer. "Did you hear what I said? I'm a thief, Steffi—or at least a would-be thief."

"But not any more," she said quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"That was your plan when we came here, but it isn't your plan any more, is it?"

"No! I made that decision earlier today."

She smiled at him and rubbed an imaginary smudge off his cheek. "I'm not going to take you seriously, Jerry. I'm not even going to believe you, because it's so absurd. Nobody could steal the duranium out of that safe. It would take ten men with a tractor and a derrick. Duranium isn't something you just pick up and put in your pocket."

"But I wasn't lying. And there wouldn't be much of a problem involved in the stealing. There are things you don't know, Steffi. *I planned to steal—*"

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She put a finger on his desperate lips. "Jerry! I said I refuse to believe what you told me. I don't care how easy it would be for you. I just won't believe it and we won't talk about it ever again. Don't you understand what I'm saying?"

He looked at her dully for a moment, then said, "Sure—I understand. I know exactly what you mean—you mean you love me."

"That's right, darling."

With a choked cry, he reached out for her. She slipped naturally into his arms, her lips raised. For a moment he looked down into her eyes and whispered, "Steffi, Steffi—"

He closed his eyes as he kissed her so he could not see her eyes widen and her face stiffen with pain. She kissed him and then turned her face away and hid it in his shoulder so she could set her lower lip between her teeth and bite down on it to keep from screaming.

To him it was a brief moment, but to her it seemed an age before he released her. But she made no effort to escape and stayed in his arms until he pushed her gently away.

Jerry said, "Darling, I never loved anybody before and I never will again. This is it!"

Her smile was tight, but he did not notice this. She raised one hand and stroked his hair. "I'm glad, darling. You can never know how glad. Because if you didn't love me, I think I'd just crawl away and die."

He reached for her again and she instinctively cringed and turned her left side away from him. He was instantly aware of this. "Baby—are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No—no, of course not, but —but my arm—be careful with it, darling."

He turned his eyes downward with concern. "Where does it hurt? What's wrong with it?"

"Right there. I—I think it's broken."

Instantly, she wished she could have bitten her tongue out. This when she saw the sudden suffering in his face. A dozen regrets flashed through her mind. This had been mainly her fault. She could have led Jerry out—drawn from him what he'd wanted to tell her because she had Professor Forrest's lead to go on. She had blundered and handled the whole thing badly.

He was a different person, now. His face was grim, and his eyes bleak. There was tur-

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moil of remorse within him. He opened the door on his side and got halfway out. "Move over here," he said, and extended his hands to help and then pulled them back. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to do it yourself."

She slid over into his seat as he rounded the car and got in behind the wheel. She regarded him anxiously and said, "I guess it was just one of those freak things that happens once in a lifetime. Like the man who broke his neck getting up out of his easychair—"

"Sure." The word was spoken grimly.

"I must have turned it wrong."

"That's right."

"It can happen you know."

"It happens every day. People walk along the street and suddenly their head falls into their hands. Freak accidents." He was driving carefully out of the park, gripping the wheel as though he expected it to jump out of the car and, of its own accord, roll back in among the trees.

"There was a case once where—"

"Steffi!"

"Yes?"

"Stop it!"

"Stop what, darling?"

"Lying. Trying to hide it. You know what happened and so do I."

"But, Jerry. You couldn't—"

"I broke your arm. I was in love with you and I kissed you and broke your arm doing it. I know that and you know it."

"I know no such thing!"

"Steffi! Why did you let me do it? Why didn't you scream?"

"Darling—it was worth it." She was trying to say something—anything that would bring him out of his terrible mood of self-condemnation. Instinct told her it was the most important job she had ever attempted.

"You don't know how lucky you were," he said harshly. "You could easily be dead now. Mangled, crushed—"

She forced a light laugh over the rising pain. "Jerry, are you trying to make me believe you're some kind of a sex maniac?"

"Something almost as bad. Where's the nearest doctor?"

"Doc Kellogg is right on the campus. He's not the closest, but he's the one I'd rather go to."

Little was said from that time on. Jerry stared straight ahead, his lips set tight, and Steffi sat in miserable pain, but with this not nearly so

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bad as the misery in her heart. So close to this boy, yet so far away. What could she do? How could you bridge a gap that seemed too wide? If love couldn't do it, what could?

Jerry pulled up in front of Doctor Kellogg's neat white house. He was out and around the car almost before it ceased rolling. He opened the door. "Here, lean on me—take my arm and I'll put mine around your waist. But I won't squeeze and you might slip down, so hold tight."

Steffi laughed. "It's only a fractured wrist, darling—maybe not even that. You'd think I was a basket case."

Jerry led her slowly up the walk, not answering. He rang the bell and the doctor himself answered—in his shirtsleevss, peering out. "Who is it? "Why, Steffi! What on earth's happened?"

"Nothing very important, Doc," Steffi said, striving to speak lightly. "We were out in the car and I slipped and caught myself against a tree. Maybe I snapped one of the bones in my wrist."

"Come in here, young lady! Mooning around in the park after dark. Lucky you didn't break a leg or two." Inside, Doctor Kellogg peered intently through thick bifocals. "Is this the young man that's got your heart doing flips?"

"Doctor!" Steffi said. "Spare our blushes."

"You can wait here, young man. And if you hear her yelp, don't come galloping to the rescue." He led Steffi through a door beyond which Jerry could see white walls, shining cabinets, spotless, gleaming instruments.

The door closed. . . .

Half an hour later, Steffi and Doctor Kellogg emerged, Steffi's arm splinted and cradled in a band around her shoulder. Doctor Kellogg stopped suddenly. "Well, that's a fine thing. Your young man was too busy to wait."

"He's probably in the car," Steffi said hurriedly. "Thank you, Doctor, for the first aid. You'll send a bill."

He laughed. "Oh, yes. Eleven million dollars. You just take care of that sprain and you'll be as good as new in a week or so."

Steffi said good-bye and almost ran to the car. There, she stopped short. Jerry was not inside.

He was nowhere around.

An hour later, Steffi was huddled miserably in an overstuffed chair in Professor Forrest's library. Forrest sat opposite her. He wore a dress-

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ing gown and was tamping tobacco into a bulldog pipe. He said, "It's a strange story, my dear. I don't have to tell you that you handled the whole thing badly. You were pretty clever in tracking the lad down—or rather sitting still and acting as bait, but you should have come to me as soon as you made contact."

"I know. It's so easy to see all these things after. Let's just call me stupid and be done with it."

"And you have no idea where he went?"

"Not the slightest."

"Do you think he will ever come back to the park?"

Steffi's smooth forehead wrinkled in thought. "No, I'm sure he won't, but I wish that were the least of my worries, bad as it is—not seeing him again."

Forrest questioned silently and struck a match for his pipe.

Steffi blew her nose on a wispy white handkerchief and went on. "I'm in a spot, Professor," she wailed. "I'm in a hell of a spot. I—I just don't know where my loyalties should lie any more!"

"You're in love with the boy so your feelings are understandable. You naturally want to do what's best for him."

"That boy's all I really want in the world, Professor."

Forrest studied her. "Steffi, have I ever double-crossed you—done you a wrong?"

"Why, what a question! Of course not!"

"Then why not trust me in this? My interest was academic originally, but if you feel as you seem to, I want the best for the boy too."

"I guess I'd better be a snitcher, then," Steffi said, miserably.

"What is it that's on your mind."

"Oh, I may be all wrong, but I've got a hunch he—and whoever he's with—are after our duranium stock."

Professor Forrest's eyes widened. "Good Lord! Do they dare?"

"I said it was only a hunch. I'm probably doing him an injustice."

"No. It follows. Whoever is behind these luckless boys is clever and would play for high stakes. One big killing. He must know the sort of thing they're doing can't go on forever without disaster."

"But you can't call in the police!" Steffi said desperately. "You can't!"

"The best thing for the boy would be to confound him in this thing."

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"That's about what I expected," Steffi said hopelessly. "Exactly what the Chief of Police would say."

"Now wait a minute, young lady," Forrest said mildly. "Not so fast. It might happen that I think I know how to handle such a possibility better than the police. I'd probably be wrong, but I might be impractical and idealistic enough to try it."

"Oh—you angel—"

Forrest puffed his pipe. "Of course, as you say, you couldn't say definitely that there will be an attempt on the duranium."

Steffi smiled weakly. "As a matter of fact, Professor, I'm pretty sure of it. I wouldn't admit it if you hadn't said what you did. I'm certain of it."

"Then let's give it a little thought. . . ."

Jerry sat in Hayden's office staring coldly at the wall. Hayden regarded him in silence for a few moments. Then he said, "So it looks pretty good to you."

"I said so, didn't I?"

"And if you remember, I said we'd talk it over and plan it right."

"We'll just go over and get the stuff. That's all there'll be to it."

"I'm surprised at you. You're talking like a child. Do you think I'd risk the safety of this organization on an unplanned proposition no matter how lucrative?"

"All right," Jerry said impatiently. "What do you want to know?"

"What you know."

"The duranium is kept in a safe in the south wall of the physics lab in the west wing of the main building at the University."

"It's just lying in there on the floor?" Hayden asked caustically.

Jerry gave him a quick scowl and said, "Of course not. It's in what's probably a pretty big lead container—on wheels so they can push it around."

"Fine. Now, about that wing—"

"It's probably wired to a burglar alarm, but that won't be any problem. We'll just push a hole through the brick foundation under the physics lab. There's an iron staircase that goes up from there. I've seen it through a window. It may lead into the lab or into the hall, but either way is all right. If we land in the hall and need a door into the lab, we'll make one."

"Is there a watchman?"

"An old fuddy who spends

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most of his time sleeping on a cot in the basement."

"Is he armed?"

"I doubt it."

"Maybe you'll find out the hard way—with a bullet in your belly."

"That would be all right, too."

Hayden narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "It's the girl, isn't it?"

"What about her?"

"Something happened between you and the girl to make you this way."

"Listen. My private life is my own business. All that's important to you is that I'm willing to go in and get the duranium."

"You mean that prior to —whatever happened — you planned not to go through with it?"

"As a matter of fact—yes. But how does that concern you? I'm ready now."

"Excellent. And I'm satisfied with the setup. Also, I'm convinced that you can handle the thing, so I'm leaving it entirely up to you."

"Thanks," Jerry answered, bleakly.

"How many of the boys will you need?"

"None."

"Now let's not be silly about this thing. I insist that you take at least one."

"All right. Tom Ames and I will do it."

"Then it's settled."

"Not quite," Jerry said, arising from his chair. "One thing more must be understood."

"What's that?"

"After we get the stuff, I'll bring it here to you. Then I walk out. I'm finished—done."

"What about your cut?"

"I want no cut. I give you the duranium and we're even, finished, and I head out."

This fit admirably with Hayden's plans. He knew this operation of his could not go on forever and he'd planned and pointed it toward one big killing, just as Professor Forrest had reasoned. As a matter of fact, none of the boys were going to get a cut from the duranium. Hayden was set to get it within his grasp, cash in on it, and leave the country fast.

He arose also, and said, "Very well, Jerry. I can't run your life for you. You're a free agent. Just do this for me. Bring the duranium with some protection around it. Wrap it in lead or something. I'm going to have to carry it."

"Okay."

"When's your time?"

"Tonight?"

"Then I'll wait here for you."

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Jerry got up and left the office. Outside he pushed Tom Ames' feet off the lounge. "Come on, sleeping beauty. We've got a job to do—and right now!"

"If he tries it at all, I'm sure it will be tonight," Steffi said.

She and Professor Forrest were seated on two stools in the physics lab. They had placed the stools near the open door to the large closet housing textbooks and supplies.

Forrest sat quietly sucking on his cold bulldog pipe, his frown hidden from Steffi by the darkness. He said, "I'm not sure—not at all sure—that I'm doing the right thing. It's all right to be understanding, but this is serious business. Two hundred thousand dollars worth of duranium is at stake. This, coupled with the fact that duranium is dangerous material. I don't know. I think we should still call the police in on this."

"You feel you should, but you won't," Steffi said.

Forrest was surprised at the confidence in her tone. "And why are you so certain?"

"Because you've got a second reason for wanting it this way. Or perhaps I should say, your first and foremost reason."

"And what is it?"

"There's a theory you have. This is a perfect opportunity to prove it out one way or the other."

Forrest was silent for a long moment before saying, "You're a very clever girl, Steffi."

"Not clever. I just remember certain conversations we had; the reason you wanted to contact Jerry in the first place."

He reached out in the darkness and touched her. "So I guess we both have our selfish reasons. Does that make us a pair of cruel opportunists?"

"I don't know. All I want is that no harm shall come to him. No harm."

"We'll do our best to—sshh—did you hear something?"

Jerry and Tom entered the University campus from the quiet, residential side and walked across the wide lawns toward the main building.

Jerry said, "Remember what Hayden told you. This is my job. You obey my orders."

"He must be losing his grip," Tom muttered.

"Never mind about that. Just remember."

"Did I say I wouldn't?"

They walked in silence for

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a while. Then Tom asked, "What do we do when we get to the building?"

"We go inside—naturally."

"Through the front door?"

"Shut up. I'll show you when we get there."

They came up from the grove by the science building and crept like shadows into the darkness along the wall of the main building.

"Right here," Jerry whispered. He hoped Tom did not notice the fear and uncertainty in his voice. Why had he agreed to do this mad thing? He was no criminal. It went against his grain, this sneaking around in the darkness. But then again, what else was there for him in life? He could not live normally. That had been proved. He could not have Steffi. And this was a way to get back at the society that had turned its back on him. He told himself this fiercely and ordered himself to believe it.

They crouched by the window until Jerry was sure all was clear. "Okay," he said. "Push through the bricks right there—not too close to the window—far enough away to clear the burglar alarm."

Tom took a piece of leather from his pocket and wrapped it around his doubled fists. Then he drew his arm back and hit the wall. There was the sound of crumbling brick. He hit the wall again until he had broken a jagged hole halfway through.

"All right," Jerry whispered, and while Tom unwrapped his fist, Jerry hooked his fingers around the jagged edges of broken brick and pulled them from the wall. When the hole penetrated to the inside, he simply hooked both hands inside and broke the hole away until it was large enough to admit them one at a time.

They slipped inside and found themselves in a dimly lit basement. The walls were lined with green-painted lockers and the floor was carpeted. They crossed to the steel stairway and went up softly, Jerry in the lead.

The door was locked. He took a firm grip on the knob and applied pressure, hoping the lock would give when the knob broke. There was the sound of grinding metal and he held the knob loose in his hand. But the door remained locked.

Tom came up beside it. "Let's hit it together," Tom said. "It will be more quiet that way."

Their shoulders smashed into the door as one—softly—and the lock snapped.

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The door to the physics lab was unlocked. Tom turned the knob and looked quickly at Jerry. "Something funny. This door shouldn't be—"

"The hell with it. Go on in."

They entered. The lab was dark and silent, lighted only by the faint glow coming in from the street lamps outside. The limbs of a tree moving in the breeze gave this glow a wavering quality.

"The safe is there," Jerry said, pointing.

"Come on then. Let's get it over with."

They advanced together and stood before the safe door. "An old-fashioned one," Tom whispered. He took the handle in his fist and twisted. The handle broke with a sharp sound. The door swung open an inch.

Grinning, Tom suddenly put his hands on the safe door and strained his muscles against it. The tortured metal groaned as the hinges bent at their weakest points and broke away from the wall. Tom raised the door weighing at least half a ton, above his head in a quick spasm of sheer physical pleasure.

"Put that down!" Jerry hissed. "Quietly! Do you want the whole University to hear us."

Tom shrugged and laid the door down gently. Jerry said, "And didn't I tell you to take things easy? There's no excuse for deliberately wrecking property needlessly."

"Let's get the stuff and get out of here. . . ."

Steffi and Professor Forrest stood frozen in the closet. They had pushed the door open and the Professor was just in the act of stepping out when Tom tore the safe door off its hinges. "Good Lord!" Forrest whispered. "Did you see that?"

"I—I didn't think so," Steffi whispered back. "But if you did, I guess I saw it too."

Jerry was entering the vault. They heard his voice: "I've got to take a chance and snap on the light. It's too dark to see in here."

"That's all right," Tom said. "It's sheltered from the windows."

The light snapped on and Tom stepped into the vault.

Jerry said, "This is the lead cabinet. Let's not take a chance rolling it. The sound might carry all the way downstairs through the floor. Here —give me a hand."

Steffi felt Forrest's fingers dig into her good arm as the two youths caught the lead cabinet under its lower edge and carried it out in the lab

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like a basket of clothes. "Almost a ton!" Forrest whispered in a choked voice.

"The lid's on top," Tom said. "I'll break it off."

"Just the lock," Jerry said. "Don't tear the lid off. There's no need."

Tom broke the lock on the cabinet door as though it were a piece of weak wire and laid the six-inch-thick slab of lead over on its hinges.

Jerry bent down and plunged his hand inside and brought out a small metal container. He opened it swiftly and held a tiny silver-colored tube in his hand.

Steffi found her voice. "No, Jerry! No!" she screamed. "Drop it! It's fatal! For God's sake, drop it!"

Both Jerry and Tom whirled. Jerry fell back a step, gripping the tube tight in his hand. Tom, acting on quick reflex, picked up the lead cabinet and hurled it in the direction of the closet.

As he did so, Jerry yelled wordlessly and leaped forward to intercept the juggernaut. He hit it and deflected it, knocking it down. It hit the floor with a rending crash, one end going completely through.

Tom turned on his confederate, snarling. "What is this? A trap? Are these two friends of yours? What are you trying to pull?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do. But you aren't going to kill them. You aren't going to kill anybody."

"They've seen us. They'll remember us. I'm not going to jail at this stage of the game."

Steffi said, "Jerry—darling! Throw that duranium away! Put it back in the cabinet! Do something with it. Even now it may be too late!"

"I'd say that under normal circumstances, it is too late." Professor Forrest observed. He stood as though completely divorced from the action. He was watching both Jerry and Tom with a keen, almost academic interest.

Steffi seized his hand, pleading. "Do something—please! Make them stop!"

"I'm afraid there isn't much I can do except suggest it to them. You—lad," he said, indicating Jerry. "I wonder if you know how dangerous that capsule is?"

Jerry was watching Tom like a cat. He glanced down at the tube. "This duranium? It won't hurt me."

Forrest's keen gaze sharpened. "How do you know that?"

"I can't say. I just *know*—that's all."

Jerry had no time to go into

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the subject further. He had edged between Tom and his quarry, and now Tom struck. He lunged forward and swung viciously at Jerry's head. Jerry sidestepped and Tom went forward, off-balance, his fist hitting the wall. The plaster cracked and fell to the floor and the metal binding behind it bent and snapped with a sound like a gunshot.

As he turned, Jerry lunged at him and they came together with a crash. It was a weird and terrible battle; thudding, bone-crushing blows that would have killed normal men. But these two—a new breed of supermen—were so evenly matched that there was only the thud of crushing fists against super-resistant flesh and bone.

Tom went down from a right to the jaw that would have torn the head off an ox. But he was up immediately and drove into Jerry, smashing him through the wall in the midst of thundering sound.

Steffi chose this moment to faint. This appeared to annoy Professor Forrest. He caught her as she went down and carried her into the vault, feeling she would be safest there. Then he returned to the hole in the wall and stood watching the battle in the next room with an expression of awe on his face.

He saw Jerry go down, but only to rise again and meet Tom in the center of the room. There, they locked hands and braced themselves like two Roman wrestlers and the battle centered down into a clear-cut test of strength.

Silence fell over the room, punctuated only by the sound of their tortured breathing. Professor Forrest stepped through the hole in the wall and skirted around to the door and turned on the light so he could see better. He watched with rapt gaze, as a man hypnotized; saw them bend back and forth as one, then the other, gained the upper hand.

He apparently had no thought for the fact that his life might hang in the balance if he remained where he was until the finish. He only stared. And saw Tom gradually gain the upper position, forcing Jerry further and further down until the latter was on one knee. Then deeper and ever deeper, until Jerry collapsed with a tortured sob and fell to the floor, his strength gone.

Tom hung over him for a moment, fighting for air, then he arose and turned and walked to where Professor Forrest was standing. He raised his

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hands. Forrest held his eyes calmly on those of the maddened boy. He said, "So now it's my turn? Well, let's get it over with quickly. You'll be able to do it with a flick of your wrist."

Tom pushed one hand forward with the fingers outstretched until his palm almost touched Forrest's throat. "You'll make it quick won't you?" Forrest asked, "as a favor to me?"

Tom's other hand flexed into a fist. Then he turned suddenly and slammed it through the wall. He stood for a moment and went slowly to his knees, hanging from the imprisoned fist, his head down, sobbing like a child.

Forrest laid a hand on his shoulder. "Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "Things aren't nearly as bad as you think. They never are. . . ."

Jerry leaned forward in his bed as Steffi smoothed his pillow and said fretfully, "I'm damned if I can see any sense to this. There's nothing wrong with me, I tell you. Three days in this blasted bed! You'd think I was an invalid."

"You should be dead," Steffi said, fondly. "You know that don't you? Picking up a handful of duranium as though it was sawdust."

"But it couldn't hurt me! I told you that. Do you think I'd have gone after it if it could have burned me?"

"But, darling, how did you *know* duranium couldn't harm you?"

He looked at her blankly. "I can't say. I suppose for the same reason a person knows water can't hurt him when he drinks it."

"A pretty lame reason. And it didn't satisfy the authorities. That's why you've been here in bed. They've subjected you to every test known——"

"And you've come through clean as a whistle." This from Professor Forrest, who had just entered the room. "So far as you're concerned, the duranium might just as well have been sawdust."

"Hello, Professor." Jerry's mood seemed to dampen somewhat.

"Good morning. And how is your patient behaving, Steffi?"

"Like a spoiled brat. He keeps wanting to get up."

Forrest sat down by the bed. "You're a scientific sensation, Jerry. Nothing like it since the invention of the wheel."

"Another way of saying I'm a freak."

"Nonsense! You should be proud. And you will be when

(Concluded on page 117)

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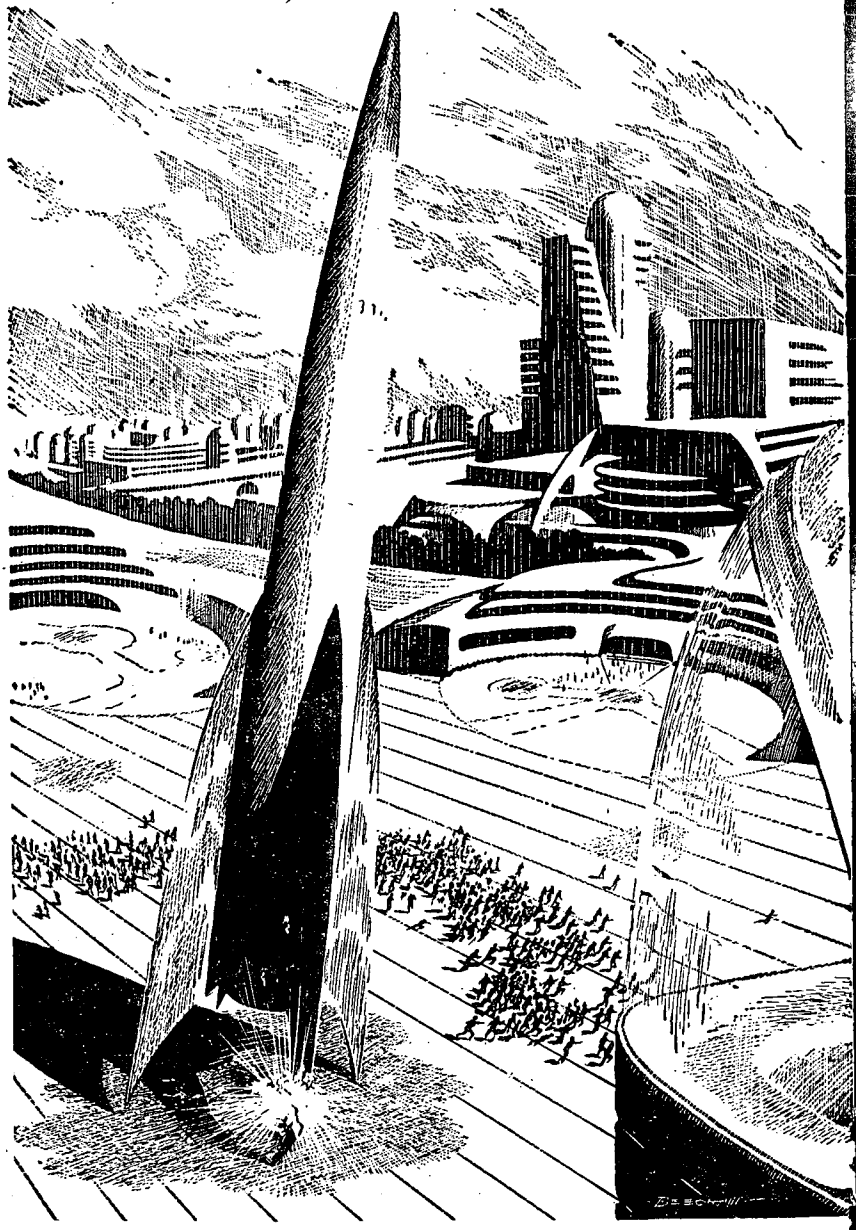

96 The giant ship tottered—then plunged earthward!

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HE RAN ALL THE WAY

By MILTON LESSER

Because I could run faster than any living human in all the world, the Karadi Masters had a use for me. Then one day a gorgeous woman suggested I dedicate my feet to the service of Liberty. That was when I learned that although a man may outrun humanity, he can never hope to leave himself behind!

17 May 1999

AS RECENTLY as this morning, my whole life was before me, a fine glittering web of enjoyment spun by the Karadi Masters. Now all is lost, lost. I still cannot believe it.

The dormitory was already stirring with sound and excitement when I awoke. It always is on the day of the Races, and most of the excitement is directed at me. "Going to break the three-minute mile today, Jim?" one of the boys demanded.

They all clustered around me, laughing and joking and

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wishing me luck. It went on for about half an hour, until my trainer, Peter Morey, entered the dormitory. We're the Greens, of course, but I don't have to tell you that if you know my name is Jim Pendleton. Of course you know Jim Pendleton is a Green: because right now I'm at the zenith of my fame. The Green Hope, they call me, since if anyone is going to break the three-minute mile and make the Karadi faction which backs the Green proud, that's me.

"Want to see you in private a minute, Jim," Peter Morey, my trainer, said, leading me across the crowded squad room to one of the vacant cadre rooms. He was carrying his little black satchel and I thought he was going to give me another one of his rub-downs. But he closed the door of the small room behind me and said, "Now, be reasonable, Jim."

"What do you want me to be reasonable about?" I said quietly.

"I know how you feel, that's all."

"What is this," I asked, "a guessing game?"

"Our Karadi Masters have a lot of money riding on today's race."

"I always do my best," I said. "I feel pretty good today."

"You have principles, is that it?"

"Look, Mr. Morey. If I knew what you were talking about, I'd know if I had principles about it or not."

"There's talk the Grays are giving their best boy a shot today."

"That isn't legal," I snapped.

"You see?" Morey said, without smiling. "You're getting excited."

"Do the Karadi want me to take a shot, is that it?"

Instead of answering, Morey unzipped his black satchel and took one of those hypodermic needle gadgets from it. He held it up to the light and did something with the plunger. Then he said, "Roll up your sleeve."

"I refuse," I said.

"Jim. It's only cocaine. The effect wears off in a few hours."

I shook my head. "Why don't you rig an outboard motor to my rear end, for crying out loud?"

"Jim, you're not being reasonable. If the Grays are doing it, the Greens have got to protect themselves. You want to win the race, don't you?"

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"Yes," I said.

"It's important to you, isn't it?"

"My father was a miler," I told Morey, although he already knew it. "He was an Australian and he learned a lot from Landy, but that was before the Karadi conquered the world. If I win, I want to win without the help of any stinking shot. But you would not understand."

"Conquered?" Morey hissed the word.

"All right. All right. 'Gave us the benefit of their benevolent rule,' " I recited. "Is that better?"

"The Karadi want you to take a shot of cocaine," Morey said.

"It would make my father very proud of me."

"Don't be sarcastic."

"That's all right. He's dead. The Karadi killed him. I haven't forgotten."

"Your father made a tragic mistake, Jim. Joining one of those early revolutionary movements before all Earth realized the benevolent Karadi rule was for our own good."

"Let's not talk about my father," I said.

"We don't have any more wars, do we? The Karadi have seen to that. We don't—"

"Just forget it, Mr. Morey."

"Sure, I'll forget it. Roll up your sleeve."

"No," I said.

"Damn you, it's all right with me if you want to jeopardize your own future, but don't jeopardize mine. The Karadi said I was to drug you. I'm going to drug you if I have to sit on you."

For some reason, the word indoctrination came into my mind. I was feeling mean. I said, "Boy, they sure have got you indoctrinated."

"What did you say?" Morey was suddenly alarmed. He looked at the door, but it was closed. You just don't use the word indoctrination to refer to the Karadi or their methods. They don't like it. What they don't like, you don't do.

Peter Morey got a crafty look in his eyes. "You know I'm supposed to report you," he said.

"I know," I said.

"The Karadi won't like it."

"That's true."

"I don't have to report you. No one heard. Use your head, Jim. Take the shot and I won't report you."

I was going to tell him he knew what he could do with the shot of cocaine, which would speed up my reflexes and improve my muscle coordination, but I shrugged and decided there wasn't any

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use. If the Karadi wanted me to take it, I would take it. I could argue a while and make my conscience feel better, but what the hell. When the Karadi said jump, brother, you did it headfirst.

Something went out of me, though. I'd been pointing to today's race. This was it. I'd trained myself blue in the face. I was at my prime. If ever I was going to break the three-minute mile, today was the day. With the cocaine to help me now, I probably would, but the funny part of it was, I no longer gave a damn.

"Yeah," I said finally. "O.K. You forget what I said, Mr. Morey. I'll take the shot."

"Jim. Jim, boy," he beamed at me. If the Karadi had not come swooping out of space three decades ago to invade Earth and conquer it, Peter Morey would probably be very happy somewhere today as a high-school football coach. Recreation, the Karadi said. It's what a man lives for. It's the good thing in life. They gave us everything we wanted that way: all the games, all the races, all the fights, all the wild and woolly spectator sports. And meanwhile, right under our noses, they were bleeding our planet dry. You can go all through your life refusing to realize it. I'd been doing that until today, but I'm only twenty-three. And then something comes along, and you start to think. With me it was a shot of cocaine and the three-minute mile.

I hardly felt the hypodermic needle going in. Peter Morey kept on smiling at me, looking so inane I wanted to hit him. I got just a little dreamy with the effects of the cocaine, but I could feel my heart going thump-dip, thump-dip, thump-dip as the drug took hold.

The mile race was the main event of the weekly Field Day in New York. We toed the line at eleven hundred hours, three Grays and three Greens. But only two of us mattered, and the crowd knew it. Me, Jim Pendleton, for the Greens, and a tall gawky lad named Mike Shanon for the Grays.

It was a crisp sunny morning, cool for May but perfect for running. A mile was four times around the four-forty cinders, and the course looked perfect from the starting line. It hadn't rained in a week. I smiled at Shanon and he smiled at me. He'd drawn the inside track, but I didn't care. It just didn't matter now. I'd

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run my damndest and I could win or lose or fall flat on my face. I didn't care which.

They gave us the gun and all at once the wildly waving Green banners on one side of the stadium and the wildly waving Gray banners on the other side dissolved in a blur of color. Shanon set the pace with big, gawky ground-consuming strides, but I was running easily, effortlessly. The race wasn't going according to plan, but I didn't care. I ditched my two Green pacers right at the start, and they were never in contention. Shanon ditched his Grays, too. So, almost from the beginning, it was a two-man race. It was what everyone could have wished for, except me. I didn't know about Mike Shanon.

I drew abreast of him around the final turn of the last lap. I poured it on and it felt as if I were flying. I headed him with a hundred yards to go. I hit the tape with my arms up and outstretched, the way you're supposed to, and I still felt nothing. With the cocaine in me, I could have run the race all over again.

I trotted it off and then walked it off, so the muscles in my legs wouldn't bunch. The Greens gave me a kind of mild ovation, but they were waiting for the official results.

I was sitting down on the green infield grass with a blanket draped across my shoulders when the P. A. announcer's voice rang out clear and loud across the suddenly hushed stadium. "The winner," he boomed, "Jim Pendleton of the Greens. The time of the race, for a new track, New York City, New York-New England, United States, Western Hemisphere and World record—two minutes, fifty-nine and seven-tenths seconds!"

That brought the house down. For half an hour you could hear nothing but the roaring from the Green side of the stadium—and from the Gray side, too. I felt nothing, nothing.

That night, I slipped out of the dormitory—which the Karadi maintain for orphaned athletes—and broke training. I did not do it intentionally. But I thought of my dead father, and the great Landy under whom he had trained, and I couldn't help it. I hit the bars in downtown New York, and I began to get drunk.

I remember people pointing at me and whispering, "That's Pendleton, the great

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miler. Set a new world record today." Some of them wanted to engage me in conversation. I shook them off. I was feeling surly. I hated them, all of them, the vapid, un-seeing, un-realizing, thoroughly indoctrinated crowd. But I hated myself more.

Round about midnight, I wound up in a little place down near the Battery. A fog had drifted in off the Bay, and you could smell the tidewater. On a clear night, you could see the lights of Governors Island, where the Karadi had their New York headquarters. Tonight you could not see them, though, and I was glad.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" the barman said. "You ought to go home, son."

He didn't recognize me, which was natural enough. While his customers had crowded around the TV screen this afternoon, watching the race, he was busy serving them up.

"That's all right," I said. "Give me 'nother."

He looked at me and shook his head, but poured another. Well, that's what the Karadi tell us. No antagonism, brothers. Don't argue, compromise. Don't fight, sleep it off.

I drank it. I don't remember what I was drinking. It had no taste. It went down hard and harsh and I could feel it go to my head almost at once, joining what was already there. I smiled at myself in the mirror behind the bar. The boy in there, staring back at me, looked very drunk. He had a pleasant enough face, if you could forget the vapid, drunken smile. But I hated him. I hated Jim Pendleton and everything which made Jim Pendleton possible.

I had four more drinks. The bar was almost deserted. I became aware of someone standing down at the far end, staring at me. I didn't look to see who it was. I kept on drinking.

"Hey, brother," the barman complained. "I usually go on home at one o'clock."

"Tha's O.K.," I said, leering at him. "Close up for you."

"Aw, brother," he told me mildly. "Say, now, brother."

"You see that no-good rat in there," I said, pointing at my image in the tinted mirror behind the bar. "You see him?"

"Just take it easy, brother."

"I hate his guts. Only, he doesn't have any guts."

"Maybe I can walk you to where you live, brother."

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"He ought to be shot," I said.

"Who, brother?"

"The guy in there." Pointing at the mirror.

"Aw, lay off. You had a few too many. Girl stand you up or something?"

"He doesn't have any guts at all, at all."

When I waved my hand he shook his head and poured me another drink, leaving the bottle on the bar because he figured I'd want more.

"He's got less guts than amphioxus," I said. "You know what amphioxus is? It's a kind of earthworm that swims in the water. No guts at all."

"I'm closing up, brother."

"Not before I bean him one, you're not," I said stubbornly. I picked up the half-full bottle by its narrow neck. I sneered at myself in the mirror, seven feet away behind the bar. I hurled the bottle at my image.

The bottle shattered and so did the mirror. A piece fell down, but most of it was still there, cracked and shattered but adhering to the backing. My face leered at me from among the long, zig-zagging cracks.

"Now I'll have to call the police," the barman said apologetically.

"No, you won't," someone said. I looked around. It was the person down at the far end of the bar, who had been watching me. My vision was beginning to swim now. I couldn't see very well. The person had a girl's voice. "That won't be necessary," she said. "I'll pay you for the mirror."

"Well, that's fine, lady. That's different. Praise the Karadi, then, there's no need to call the police." When something fortuitous happened, you praised the Karadi. Whoever you were talking to was supposed to respond in kind. I was drunk, but not so drunk that I didn't realize the girl ignored her cue, took some money from her handbag and gave it to the barman, then came up to me, got her hand on my elbow and said:

"Come on, Jim Pendleton. I'll take you someplace you can sleep it off."

"In the morning," I said. "In the morning, when I'm not back at the dormitory—"

"We'll get you back there in time. Stop worrying. Now, come on with me."

She led me outside. I tried my best to walk a straight line, but I wouldn't have succeeded without her help. Outside, a fine drizzle was falling.

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I remember walking for a little while, then taking the subway, then walking some more, then going upstairs in a house and drinking what seemed like gallons of black coffee. Someone washed off my face with a cold cloth and I kept on saying, "I hate myself. I hate myself."

She had a soothing voice. Everytime I said how I hated myself, which was often, she would say, "No, you don't. You don't really hate yourself. You hate the Karadi Masters. But you're afraid to express that hatred, and so you direct it at yourself. Listen to me, Jim Pendleton. You don't hate yourself."

"You don't know what it's like," I said.

"I saw you run today, Jim."

"I was drugged."

"Yes. I thought you were."

"I was too weak, too yellow, to refuse."

"That's not the way to fight them. Do you want to fight them?"

"I don't know what you're saying."

"More coffee?"

"Yes, please. Fight them . . . ?"

"The Karadi. Why not? Some of us who were like you, who hated themselves until they realized that the hate was mis-directed . . ."

"Please," I said. "My head's like a balloon. I can't think straight. I don't even know who you are. I'd better go."

"Listen. I don't want you to forget this meeting. We've been watching you a long time. We need people. Especially people like you, who can love or hate or believe hard enough. Here, I'll give you a note."

I waited with my hand out. I waited for the note. I thought she kissed me lightly on the lips. My head was swimming. She put a slip of paper, folded, in my hand, and closed my fingers around it. I thought she had blonde hair and was very beautiful. If I saw her on the street tomorrow, I probably would not know her. Maybe she was not even real. Maybe I was dreaming.

"Better put it in your pocket," she said.

"What?"

"The note, silly. Put the note away."

We went outside together. It had stopped raining, but the sidewalk looked slick and wet. She squeezed my hand and said she would take me back to the dormitory if I wanted. No, I said. It would be all right. I could find my way back. I thanked her. For

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what? she said. Soon, she said, she'd want to be thanking me.

I went away from her walking a straight line without even trying. That's how you can tell you're getting sober. It doesn't matter if you can walk a straight line or not. If you feel the need to try, you're still drunk.

That night I read her note back in the dormitory. It said: "If you hate yourself long enough and hard enough and if you have the courage to study that hatred, you'll realize it's the Karadi you should hate. If you agree, contact the undersigned at once. In any event, destroy this note immediately." The note was signed, Jo Bowen. A downtown address was scrawled after her name.

Was Jo Bowen the blonde girl who had taken me home with her? Probably, I thought. She hardly knew me but had given me this note, had placed her life in my hands. For the note was clearly, obviously treason. If I had any sense, I thought as I undressed, I'd destroy the note and then forget all about it. Who the hell was Jo Bowen or anyone to tell me if I hated myself because I'd taken cocaine to set a new world record in the mile I didn't really hate myself at all, I hated the Karadi? Who the hell was she? I asked myself belligerently. If a man wants to hate himself because he needs hating . . .

That's it, Pendleton, I thought. Wallow. Go ahead and wallow in it. I lit a match and burned Jo Bowen's note. But first I memorized her address.

23 May

Today I saw her again!

Six days. Six whole days. I must have been insane to wait that long. Or a coward. But the waiting is over and done with now. There won't be any more waiting for Jim Pendleton.

Naturally, this diary is a problem. Jo Bowen laughed at me when I told her about the diary. We're all supposed to keep diaries, I said. It's the law. The Karadi check them every month. It's for our own good. It's a great service. If we need psychological treatment, the diaries will reveal it. But, she said, you don't have to write everything in your diary. Or, you don't have to write the truth. The Karadi Masters insist on truth, she admitted, but some things are just more important. When we finished that particular conversation, she

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wasn't smiling anymore. She looked worried.

On June 2 we're going out to the Karadi spaceport where New York International Airport used to be and sabotage one of the Karadi interstellar liners. I'm to meet Jo at a subway station downtown. This is the real three-minute mile in your life, Jim Pendleton, she said. This is the important thing. Because the Karadi rule us but are very few in number. They're spread thin across the galaxy. If they have too much trouble, too much fifth column work, on a particular colonial world, they'll give it up as a bad job and go home. We'll be free again.

I'm not going to see her until June 2; we mustn't be seen together more than necessary, she says. She's right, of course, but I can barely concentrate on anything without her. I keep thinking of her.

We spent all day together today, just walking and talking in Central Park. The great old locust trees are blooming green again there. It was very quiet and very lovely.

Jo! Jo—I hardly know you but I think I'm falling in love with you.

1 June

They questioned me for five hours at the Mental Hygiene Clinic today. How could I have been so stupid?

Because yesterday I handed in my diary, as I was supposed to! They plant the idea when you're young; they indoctrinate you; it's subconscious. All week I said I would destroy the diary and rewrite it, leaving out all reference to Jo Bowen. But I handed it in, complete. I don't even remember doing it.

"What you've written is treason, Pendleton," they said at the Mental Hygiene Clinic. "You're fully aware of that, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

The psychologist was a human. Few people ever get to see the Karadi. "You could be put in a house of correction a long time for what you've written. Just for thinking it."

"Yes, sir."

"Pendleton, you had a great future. Anything you wanted, within reason. Why did you do it, Pendleton?"

I didn't try to explain. I just sat there.

"The Karadi still have faith in you. Does that surprise you?"

"Yes."

"The Karadi are benevo-

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lent. They're willing to give you an opportunity to atone."

I sat mutely.

"Counter-espionage, Pendleton. The Karadi have had their eye on the Bowen girl a long time. She belongs to an organization which . . . but we needn't tell you about the organization."

No, I thought. Don't tell me. Never tell me. Never give me the facts so I can start thinking for myself.

"Are you listening?"

"Yes," I said.

"This is the only opportunity you'll get. Meet the Bowen girl as scheduled. Your diary is incrimination enough, but we want to catch her in the act."

"The Karadi?" I said.

"No. Not the Karadi. We, their human servants. We serve the Masters, Pendleton. All of us. Not because we have to, but because we want to. You understand."

"Yes," I said. But I did not.

"Go with her. Tell her you destroyed your diary and submitted a harmless one in its place. We'll catch her at the spaceport."

"If I don't?" I said.

"But you will."

"Yes. I will."

"Good. After that, Pendleton, you will need some rest and rehabilitation at one of our Mental Hygiene camps in the Caribbean. They're very pleasant. Like a vacation, almost. Well, good luck to you, friend."

We shook hands. I got out of there.

2 June

I didn't sleep last night. I realize now that I should have. I will need all my strength today.

All night I thought about it. See Jo Bowen. Don't see Jo Bowen. But not seeing her was out of the question. It would solve nothing, for the Karadi expected me to lead her into their trap. If I didn't, she would go anyway and then we both would be in trouble.

Instead of taking the subway, I started early and walked downtown. There were plenty of people on the streets, but no Karadi. There rarely were. They didn't approve of social intercourse with a backward colonial people, with the humans of Earth. Almost, you wouldn't know we were a conquered people. But if you looked closely it was there in the shabby clothing and the unrepaired buildings and the slow, mechanical, fatalistic way the people went from place to place. Subtley, everything said:

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We're not our own masters. We have the Karadi.

Jo Bowen wasn't alone when I got to her place. It was unexpected, and it took something out of me. "Hello, Jim," she said. "I was worried about you."

"I walked all the way."

"This is Mike Shanon."

I looked at the tall, gangling young man. I smiled and said. "Oh, hello."

"That was a good race you ran," Mike said.

"I was drugged."

"So was I, Pendleton. It was a good race, anyway."

"Mike's one of us," Jo said. "Has been for a long time."

"I guess I'm Johnny-come-lately," I said.

Jo smiled. She was very beautiful. "We've been planning this for a long time," she said. "The Karadi are sending a valuable cargo home on the space liner *Orion*. We're going to stop it."

"Home?" I asked her. "Where is the Karadi home? We don't even know that."

"No. It's their secret. It isn't in the solar system, though."

"How do you know."

"That's what our scientists say. You see, if the Karadi came from one of the inner planets, Mercury or Venus, their spaceships would leave Earth at sunrise, adding the speed of Earth's rotation to their blastoff. If they came from one of the outer planets, they'd have a double problem. First of all, they'd be inclined to make the trip when the planet was in apposition, on the same side of the sun as Earth is. Then, they'd blast off at sunset, again adding the Earth's rotational speed to their initial power. You see?"

"Not exactly," I admitted.

"One of the stars in the constellation Orion seems to be a good bet," Mike Shanon said.

"Because the ship is called that, the *Orion?*"

"No," Jo told me. "They have other ships, named for other constellations and stars. There's a reason, though. They blast off solar north in the winter and solar south in the summer. That means a star in a constellation which rises in the northern hemisphere in the winter. We say Orion because there's a star in that constellation which seems close enough."

I knew a little astronomy. "Sirius!" I blurted.

"That's what our astronomers think," Mike Shanon told me.

"They blast off at any time of day," Jo said. "That seems

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to indicate they leave the solar system altogether. The only pattern they follow is solar north in winter, solar south between the spring and autumn equinoxes. It looks like Sirius."

"Listen," I said. "Listen. I don't know how to tell you this."

Jo took my hand and looked at me. "What is it?"

"Yesterday they . . . questioned me."

"But why? Why?"

I felt the blood rising hotly in my cheeks. "I'm not much of a saboteur," I said. I could not look at them. I turned around and recited it to the wall. "I forgot about my diary. I turned it in at the end of the month. They sent for me." I let it all out in a rush of words. "They told me to go ahead with it. They've been watching you. They want to take you in the act of committing sabotage. I'll get off with some time at one of the rehabilitation camps."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've ruined everything, haven't I?"

Mike Shanon lit a cigarette and said nothing. It meant he was out of training. You notice little things like that. Jo said, "This isn't like hitting something with a sledgehammer, Jim. It's subtle. It's always been subtle. You haven't spoiled anything."

"I don't understand."

"In the first place, my name isn't Bowen. It's an alias I use when I'm in town, which isn't often. They're looking for Jo Bowen, but she drops in and out of sight. They're not going to catch her."

"What is your name?" I asked.

"It's Jo Shanon. How do you think I knew about you, Jim? I don't follow the races. Mike told me. He thought you were ready."

"Oh," I said. "Oh." Jo Shanon, I thought. So they were married. It left me feeling empty. I said nothing.

"In the second place," Jo Shanon said, "I was worried about that diary of yours right along. Maybe it taught you a lesson now, though. You see, the *Orion* isn't blasting off from New York International. Another spaceship is, but it isn't the one we want. We want the *Orion*. It leaves from what used to be La Guardia Field."

"I'll be damned," I said. "I'll be good and damned."

Mike thumped me on the back and smiled. "Just don't go around handing in signed confessions, that's all."

"I'm still keeping a diary," I admitted.

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Jo shrugged. "Well, it won't matter where we're going."

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Jo Bowen's through in New York," she told me. "After today, you will be, too. There's a band of outlaws in the Catskill Mountains . . ."

"I never heard about them," I said.

"Of course not. The Karadi don't make those things public, Jim. They control the cities with an iron hand, but they've never had enough people on Earth to control the rural areas thoroughly. There are large outlaw bands in the Catskills, in the Adirondacks near Old Forge, in the Berkshires, to name a few. We're giving the Karadi plenty of trouble, whether they admit it or not."

"We're not very well organized," Mike Shanon said by way of apology. "It's the little things, though. We keep on the move. We keep the Karadi guessing. Sabotage. Sometimes it's just something inconvenient. Sometimes we get a real big one, like the *Orion* today. It's one of the biggest things we've ever handled."

My head was swimming with all this new information. But one thing puzzled me. I said, "If the *Orion* is such a big job, why are you using me for it? I mean, instead of your more experienced people?"

"For the same reason Mike and I have been selected," Jo explained. "Because you're fast, Jim. Because you can run. Because we'll have to get away overland in a hurry, where no vehicle can go."

Mike Shanon laughed and said, "Here's your chance to repeat that three-minute mile —without cocaine."

I didn't answer him.

"Let's go," Jo said.

We took the subway out to LaGuardia Airport, or what used to be LaGuardia Airport, in Queens. Naturally, there was no fence around it. The Karadi are pretty smart that way. They would not come out into the open with an admission they needed fences. Their control rested as much on prestige as it rested on anything else. We nibbled, Jo told me on the way out. We nibbled at that prestige. One day in the future, it was going to crumble. Listening to the way she said it, I could almost believe it.

The plan was simple. There would be a lot of fanfare and ceremony when the *Orion* blasted off. Thousands of people would be on hand. It

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was a big event in our lives these days. Our drab lives. Jo Shanon was carrying one half of a small implosion cap of atomic material. Mike was carrying the other half. When the two halves were thrust together, when Mike sprinted with them under the tail rockets of the *Orion,* the implosion would fuse the two halves of atomic material to critical mass. As atomic explosions go, it would be a pint-sized one. But it would wreck the *Orion* and destroy its cargo.

We saw the *Orion* from a long way off. After each flight, the Karadi spaceships are stripped down and stored away in sections. Thus there's only one ship on the field at a time, and that one's ready to go. She was big and trim despite her size and magnificent looking. She was two hundred feet tall, straight up into the air, long and gleaming, an enormous tapering needle with no superstructure and nothing fancy about her. Just one smooth sweeping silver line and all at once it seemed a pity to destroy her, until I thought that if the Karadi hadn't come bursting out of space to conquer us on the eve of our own greatest triumphs, we might have spaceships like that by now, only they'd be our own, they wouldn't be Karadi ships waiting to go home with the plunder of a slave Earth.

"Nervous?" Jo said.

I shook my head. "Not yet. I still can't believe we're actually going to do it."

"You know what you have to do?" Mike asked me.

"Sure. I watch. You set the bomb. If anyone tries to stop you, I don't let them. Then we run. Up on the Grand Central Parkway, there'll be a car waiting for us. We have to run to the car."

"We could probably have done it last night," Jo said. "But it wouldn't undercut the Karadi prestige if we did. Not the way it will today, with everyone watching. You understand?"

I didn't bother to nod. Suddenly I had pennies in my mouth. Like on the eve of a big race. It was fear. The taste of pennies. I was very conscious of the sweat moving in little rivulets down my side, under the jumper. We didn't have a weapon, except the bomb. We weren't going to kill any humans if they tried to stop us. Naturally, it would be humans. We always did the Karadis' dirty work. They rarely showed their faces.

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". . . twenty thousand tons of spaceship," a voice blared importantly as we neared the *Orion's* blasting pit. On all sides of the pit beyond the red line which marked off the danger area where atomic fallout and rocket backlash might strike, were thousands of spectators, dressed up in their threadbare Sunday best. This was quite an occasion. The Karadi had planned it that way. Without fanfare, the *Orion* might have blasted off safely. But the fanfare was very necessary. It was part of the Karadi way of doing things. It made our kind of sabotage possible.

"One solid piece of metal," the voice boomed. "The hull is forged in one piece on the Karadi home planet, then cut into sections. On Earth, of course, we're not capable of forging a piece of metal anywhere near that size."

Probably, it was a lie. There would be no need to forge the ship in one piece, even assuming it could be done, not if it were going to be sectioned later. Prestige. The Karadi wanted to impress us in every way possible. The crowd took it all in, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. For them it was a tour of wonderland, adding fire and verve to their drab lives.

"The Karadi have had spaceships and space travel for as long as we humans have history," the voice proclaimed. "They were blasting across the star trails before Cheops built his pyramid. Their rightful heritage is the galaxy."

Sure, I thought bitterly, and they'll keep us out of space. That's part of it, part of their system. A conquered people can't see space. We'd want more than our own little corner, drained dry by the avarice of the Karadi Masters. But what we didn't see, we wouldn't covet.

We shouldered our way through the crowd, working our way forward until we stood with our toes on the red line painted in a broad circle on the white cement apron surrounding the blast-off pit. We might have been three more spectators. We didn't look any different.

Spotted in the crowd here and there were the spaceport police in their gray-and-green uniforms. Originally the uniforms had been solid gray, but the Green faction had protested even though there had been no connection between the police and the athletic events. The Karadi had ordered a color alteration in the uniform, naturally:

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they aimed to please everyone. In the little things, only in the little things. In the big things, the important things, they pleased only themselves.

I saw Jo reach into her pocket and take out a little hemisphere of dull gray metal. I watched Mike, who followed her lead and brought out his own hemisphere. I suddenly found myself hating Mike Shanon, for no reason at all. No reason? I thought I knew the reason, but I did not want to admit it to myself. Jo was the reason. I was in love with Jo but now I could never tell her . . .

All at once, she thrust something in my hand. "Didn't want to worry you," she said. "Didn't want you to get stage fright. It's a microphone and a damper. You damp out the voice of the P. A. announcer when you you switch it on. And you do some announcing of your own."

"But I—"

"You've got to, Jim. To warn the spectators. Someone has to warn them. From the time you see me and Mike start running toward the ship, they have thirty seconds."

"All right," I said.

But she wasn't looking at me now. She was looking at Mike. She said, "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Mike's voice was hoarse.

She nudged him with her elbow. "Then come on."

And they broke across the red line, sprinting for the Karadi spaceship.

"Hey!" a policeman called. "Hey, you two! Come back. You're beyond the point of danger." He began to push through the crowd toward them.

I switched on my handmike and heard my own voice, drawn and tight, booming across the field. It sounded as if it had been projected up over my head a hundred yards or so. That way, only those people in my immediate vicinity, those who could actually see the little microphone, would know I was talking. "Attention!" I said. "Attention, please! The Karadi spaceship is about to be blown up in the name of freedom and independence for Earth. You have less than thirty seconds to get away. Death to the Karadi!" I added melodramatically. I don't know why. Probably because I was feeling for the first time completely an outlaw revolutionary.

The crowd dissolved cha-

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otically. Some of them must have believed me. Many of them did not. They broke and ran in all directions, though, milling in confusion, yelling, fighting one another. Some of them were going to be hurt, I thought, but I knew it couldn't be helped.

I looked at the spaceship. Jo and Mike had reached the rear rocket tubes now. The ship was a huge silver needle against the rich blue sky. A needle, I thought. Only it was going to be threaded with atomic destruction. Three policemen were converging on the rear rockets of the ship. They were armed only with truncheons, but from the rear of the dissolving crowd I could see others coming, and these had automatic rifles.

Jo waved at me, held up both hands with the fingers spread wide. "Ten seconds!" I called over the microphone. "You have ten seconds before the explosion!"

I saw Jo and Mike sprinting back toward me. Someone grabbed my arm and said, "Say, you're the bird doing that broadcasting." He seemed very surprised. I stiff-armed him out of the way and began moving toward Jo and Mike. Someone else stood in front of me, shaking his fist. I didn't hear the words he said. I hit him with a left hook and kept running, not waiting to see the results. We moved away with the crowd and through it. Gray and green uniforms flashed here and there. Jo was ticking off the time on her fingers. There was too much noise. I couldn't hear her, but I could see her lips moving. "Three, two, one," she said, "zero."

We hit the ground and felt the shock wave roar over us. We heard nothing. The sound deafened before it could register on the auditory nerve. The ground throbbed and shook. The horizon tilted crazily. Concrete fragments peppered us. I saw people screaming soundlessly, their mouths opened, their eyes wide with terror and disbelief.

I stood up. My legs were like water. Someone was pointing. I helped Jo to her feet and turned around. Mike was already standing.

The spaceship *Orion* was toppling.

It fell as a great tree must fall, leaning slowly as if reluctant to be uprooted. A seam was ripped open in its side from tail tubes to spike-sharp prow. Cargo and—I thought—limb-flailing Karadi were disgorged. Then the *Orion* hit

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on the far side of the apron, flat on its side, its whole gleaming length shuddering as it struck the ground, buckling the concrete. The ground shuddered again, as if in the grips of a mild earth tremor.

"Let's get out of here!" Mike said. I could hear again, but dimly. His voice sounded distant. I heard a popping noise. I turned around. One of the uniformed policemen was down on one knee, the leather sling of his automatic rifle attached to his left wrist and forearm, the rifle butt at his right shoulder. He was firing at us but he was a long way off and people kept running between us so he could only fire sporadically.

We began to run. I heard the faint wail of a fire truck speeding onto the field. I turned around and flung laughter over my shoulder. I was very wild then. I was behaving like a madman and I knew it and then I heard someone, a stranger, cry: "For Earth!" The cry was taken up, not by everyone, but by many people. "For Earth and freedom!" they roared. "Earth and freedom!" It was enough. More than enough. It made everything worthwhile, even the lives which had been lost when the small atomic bomb went off. For Earth and freedom. It had been spontaneous. At that moment, the Karadi should have been able to see the handwriting on the wall. It might take a long time yet, but one day in the future they would leave. Not because they had grown tired of Earth, but because Earthmen reclaimed their planet and their freedom.

Someone grabbed my arm. I looked. It was Jo. "What's the matter with you?" she said. Mike took my other arm, almost yanking it from the socket. We ran.

The old familiar feeling came back, the wonderful, never-forgotten feeling of how it is to do something you excell at, knowing few people can match you, knowing they can only stare and gawk and wonder.

We ran. The landscape blurred as we left the spaceport. It was color and sound and rushing wind and the way the horizon rises and falls on each long loping stride. Mike Shanon could maintain the pace, I knew, but Jo was a surprise. Her legs twinkled and flashed as she ran beside us, over the rough rutted ground so they couldn't overtake us in a vehicle.

And then I knew. I flung

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back my head and roared my laughter. Mike. Mike and Jo. What was the matter with me? I should have known at once. I ran with them and roared and felt better than I have ever felt in all my life.

4 June

The car was waiting for us on the Parkway. Three hours later, we were in the Catskills.

This is my last entry in the diary. At first I thought I would burn it, but Jo said they wanted it. It would be a fine thrilling story for one of the underground newspapers to run, she said. How a revolutionary is born. How a free Earthman fights for his heritage. It's all right with me. I don't have any family. I have nothing to worry about on that score.

They have a large armed camp in the Catskills. There are thousands of them. Guerrillas, they're called. History's forgotten fighters, until one day they're big enough and strong enough and then they swoop down and conquer the conqueror. Death to the Karadi. It's in every eye. You don't have to worry about it. You only need patience. Because looking at the people here, the dedicated people, you know it's going to happen.

Jo and I will be married tomorrow. Didn't I tell you? I'm still so excited I can hardly believe it, but being a runner, I should have known. What girl could run like Jo, matching stride for stride with the two fastest milers on Earth?

Why, Jo Shanon, of course. Mike Shanon's twin sister.

THE END

COME TUESDAY

(Concluded from page 52)

it out. You'll ruin our lovely TV!"

I said, "I know what I'm doing, don't I, Sam?"

He was leaning against the door jamb. "All I know, George—you ain't changing the future!"

I threw the switch.

Five minutes later I became aware of the telephone ringing. Yes, it was Kooteneck, all right, and he had some things to say to me. I answered with courteous resignation. Without the $39,000, without even the $1,000, which I had paid to Samson Peterson, I was in no position to alienate my boss. "I looked the place over thoroughly," I told him. "It will turn out to be old

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wiring, I'll bet. After all, I couldn't tear the partitions apart—"

Yes, I was very polite to my boss, because by now I was victim of Sam's silly obsession that you couldn't change the future.

The TV set? Well, if you're really curious as to what happens when you plug a 110-volt TV set into a 220-outlet, try it yourself.

Yeah! That's right, every tube in the set, *and* the transformer. My thousand-dollar TV set!

Bessie still won't speak to me. Not even in skid talk.

THE END

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the SMASHERS

(Concluded from page 95)

you understand. You and the others. Through you, science will learn things about protection from radiation burns it would have taken millions of deaths to discover the hard way."

"What about the others?" Jerry asked. "What about Tom?"

"That will all be worked out. The circumstances are unique and will be taken into consideration. You are a group in which not one was really bad; boys forced into a situation by a set of circumstances previously unknown. Of course, Hayden and Wiley will get the book thrown at them, and they deserve it. But the boys—psychiatry and understanding will straighten them out. As soon as they discover how valuable they are to humanity, they'll stop being ashamed. In fact, it may go the other way. You'll all probably get swelled heads."

"Not this one," Steffi said, her eyes filled with love. "I'll keep him trimmed down to size."

"And as to not fitting in," Forrest said, "that's all bosh. None of you ever had help in training yourselves. Control can be mastered in a little time. And when you need exercise, you'll get it. We'll let you tear down old buildings that nobody wants."

Forrest paused. "There's even no doubt but what you and Steffi can lead a normal, happy married existence."

Steffi touched the tip of Jerry's nose. "Do you think you'll need a psychiatrist, darling?"

He grinned and said, "Honey, all I'll ever need, is you."

THE END

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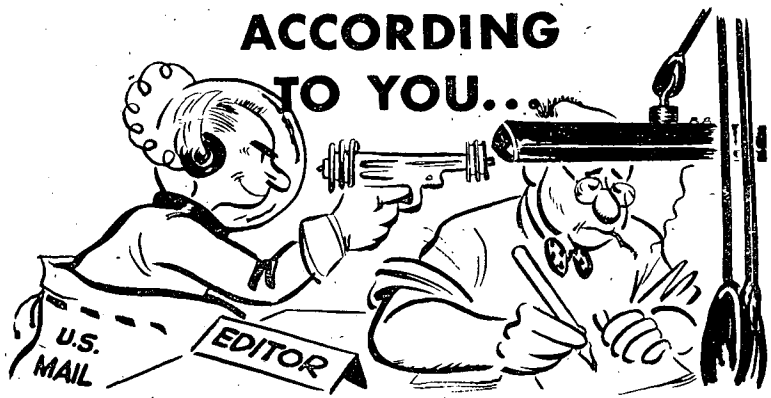

BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

I would like to be entered into the fold as one of your S-F fans. I am sort of new to all of this S-F stuff, so I bought the recent (April) *Fantastic* and found the stories and book to be very interesting.

The first three stories were very good: "The Eye and I," "Gold is Everything," "Death Has Strong Hands."

I hope you bring out more stories like those I've mentioned.

Bob Mallory
1181 Valencia St.
San Francisco, Cal.

● *You're in Bob; pick a cloud. Let's hear from you again. —Ed.*

Dear Editor:

Just finished the April *Fantastic* and enjoyed it very much. I have been, and still am, an avid S-F fan from 'way back—must be 35 years or more. I have read practically all of them.

Fantastic is out of the ordinary line, but as you say, you can't please everybody; that's what makes the world go round.

Funny how some people criticize everything. They are entitled to their opinions, but why cram, or try to cram, their ideas down another person's throat? That is where I buck out of the traces!

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Keep *Fantastic* on the same plane. It has a variety for all readers.

Ross Weber
651 Pine Street
Oxnard, California

● *We're in an age where "cramming" opinions is the order of the day. Everybody can tell anybody how to do anything . . . and does. In a way, that's fine—so long as the opinion is only an opinion and not an order. And once in a while an opinion comes along that makes real sense and it gets adopted and the magazine or the nation or the world is better off because of it. And this is called Progress and we're all for it (which is the biggest boost Progress will probably get this year), and that's our opinion. End of lecture.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

Have just finished your April '55 issue and think that the stories are wonderful. The cover with the large eye and the bomb exploding on Manhattan is great, as is the rest of the artwork. Just one thing though: could you possibly include in each issue a few one- and two-page short-short stories? I think it would add a lot to the enjoyment of the magazine.

B. Grant Willis, Jr.
French House
Phillips Academy
Andover, Mass.

● *Delighted that you liked the issue. . . . Short stories of the length you mention are almost impossible to get; at least the kind that are worth printing. It takes a deft hand to get a satisfactory plot into a thousand or fifteen hundred words.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

You don't know me, for even though I'm an old reader in science fiction, am fairly new to your magazines.

I ran across your April issue and just had to drop a line and comment on its stories. "The Still Waters" and "Silent Night" were the best, with the "Eye and I" running third.

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The cutest was Milton Lesser's "The Big Bluff" which to me was a fine piece of work.

I got quite a kick out of reading the letters in "According to You." I would like information on how to subscribe to your magazines.

As/c H. Rodney Burns
AF 11250893
Det. 5/5 WX Group
APO 864
New York, N. Y.

◉ *You'll find subscription information at the foot of the inside front cover, Rod. We've got some great stories in the works; make sure you won't miss them.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

I've read everything, but *Fantastic* is the limit. You should call it "A Hophead's Dream."

Georgiana Chanquist
3305 Federal Ave.
Everett, Washington

◉ *Ha.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

While this is a pretty late date to be inquiring, I would appreciate it if you would tell me if a sequel was ever published to the story "The Man From Yesterday," by Lee Francis, which appeared in the August, 1948, issue of *Fantastic Adventures.*

While in this story the hero, Avar, at last dies, it seems to me that with a little ingenuity the author could explain away the conclusion, just as Arthur Conan Doyle did when Sherlock Holmes was purportedly killed, and save such an inspiring character as Avar for many more surprising adventures.

David P. Willoughby
647 Parkway Building
117 East Colorado St.
Pasadena 1, California

◉ *You pose something of a problem for the editor, Mr. W.*

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You see, he wrote this story himself while a free-lance writer —coincidentally, while living in Burbank, California, a few miles from your office!—and is no longer writing science-fantasy. Even if he were, there isn't enough space in Fantastic *these days to run a full-length novel—and a serial is not indicated for a bi-monthly. Also, sequels have a habit of ruining the flavor of the first story, so it might be better to let well-enough alone. Any suggestions?—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

I finished the April issue of *Fantastic* and enjoyed every story—especially "The Eye and I." The suspense was gripping; I couldn't put it down until I finished.

The cover was well portrayed. I firmly believe that the cover should tie in with the main novel.

W. C. Brandt
Oakland, California

● *We agree completely with your closing statement, W. C. Covers on both* Fantastic *and* Amazing Stories *are ordered and then assigned to an author for the purpose of having a story written around them. Works out fine, too.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

Have certainly enjoyed the stories in the April issue, but have just one little criticism. How about having your illustrator read the stories just a little more carefully before drawing the pictures? For example: in "Death Has Strong Hands," he shows two men all decked out in space suits, yet the story plainly states that vac-suits were not needed as the atmosphere and gravity were almost Earth normal. Also, one of the characters clips another one on the jaw. Now how could he manage to do that if there was a space helmet encircling the other man's head?

Other than this, your stories are greatly enjoyed by this reader.

Carol Gray
1621 Washington
Fort Worth, Texas

● *This "illustration vs. story" situation has always been*

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a thorn in the reader's anatomy, Carol. Should an artist take a certain amount of license by straying from the plot line to achieve a more dramatic effect—or should he hew to the line and let the drawing suffer as a result? We've learned through the years that of all fiction readers, those in the science-fiction field are more aware of the tie-up between artwork and the story.—Ed.

Dear Editor:

Just read the April issue and liked it very much. My compliments to Valigursky for a fine cover. It has an abstract quality that quickly draws interest. I usually grab my S-F at random, but this cover stopped me cold.

"The Eye and I" wasn't bad, but I read a similar yarn a while back that was a lot better. I'm not sure of the author: I think it was Bradbury. Got a real kick out of "The Big Bluff."

Did you ever consider indicating the length of each story in the Contents Page? Some mags do it and it's often a big help to the reader.

A. J. Wachter
7716 Rugby
Philadelphia, Penn.

◎ *Other readers have mentioned this word-count business. The present layout of the Contents Page doesn't allow space for such shenanigans; but layouts can be changed—and will be if the demand warrants it.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

I regret that I am one of those readers who find it hard to write letters, for often I feel a deep sense of satisfaction with certain issues of periodicals that I read, and wish that the editor knew that I appreciated his efforts to please the reading public.

With the April issue of *Fantastic* I became so pleased with your "new look" for 1955, that I could not resist the desire to let you know.

I found it hard to maintain interest in the "modern" format that you adopted after leaving the pulp field, although parts of each issue of *Fantastic* and *Amazing* were good.

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With your return of many of the fine features that are traditional with science fiction, you can count on me as a regular customer.

As president of the Oklahoma Science Fiction Confederation, I would like to extend a warm invitation to you and your staff, as well as your readers, to attend our next annual convention, the Oklacon III, which will be held July 3rd and 4th at Tulsa. For additional information, write Mrs. Dolores Chappell, convention chairman, 5921 East 4th Place, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Daniel McPhail
1806 Dearborn
Lawton, Oklahoma

● *Hope your convention breaks all record, Dan.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

A short line to tell you I enjoyed the April issue but I'd like it much better if you had more stories like "Silent Night" and "The Still Waters."

Charles Marshes
220 Park Street
New Haven, Conn.

● *We would, too.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

You asked the readers to send their opinion of your magazine *Fantastic*, so here is my comment:

Perhaps my feeling can be summed up in the line you added to the April cover: "Science-Fiction." Too, too bad. Now, if you find it hard going in your competition with the countless other S-F magazines, I shall not be sorry for you.

Volume 1 of *Fantastic* was wonderful, superb, truly out of this world. The grand stories, the striking cover and rear cover—why, I would pay at least a dollar an issue for that kind of magazine.

Volume 2 began to slip, for the insidious S-F was *sneaking* in, spoiling the *Fantastic*. Why do you think *Fantastic* has to mean S-F, at least in the so-called interplanetary respect: space-ships and all that pure hog-wash? There was no real

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fantasy magazine until *Fantastic* came along—and now there is *no* real fantasy magazine any more.

Volume 3 was on the down-grade. I continued to read the magazine in the hope it would come back to fantasy. But Volume 4 has killed the goose for sure. Are there no authors writing such as John Collier and the authors of your first few issues—entertaining fully with not a word about mythical planets, C-bombs and such (deleted)?

Please return to fantasy—non-S-F—and you may count on me as your firm friend for life.

John Riley Brant
2118 Alhambra Ave.
Monterey Park, California

● *Uh-hunh. "Wonderful, superb, truly out-of-this-world" —and no customers! Like it or not, John, not enough readers have your appetite for light, delightful fantasy. We found that out, brother—the hard way. "Mythical planets, C-bombs and deleted" are the order of the day. There has to be a reason why there're no "real fantasy" magazines any more; nobody'll buy 'em—or at least not in sufficient quantities to pay the freight. Your editor was very proud of the first few issues of* Fantastic*—just as he's proud of the issues published today —but there's no reason to put out a magazine for a market that doesn't exist. Sorry.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

April *Fantastic* was my first taste of your offerings. I have never before wafted my 35¢ your way because your contents page never listed any stories by "name" authors and I was afraid yours was a magazine using only "house" names—you know what I mean: the kind where the associate editors get together with a gallon of muscatel and dream up the stories for next-ish, using any by-line that comes to mind. And don't deny that this was the practice of the early *Amazing*—I know better. All of which is neither here nor yon; therefore let me get back to the April issue:

"Death Has Strong Hands": Obviously an attempt on Chandler's part to imitate A. K. Barnes' Gerry Carlisle series. "Hands" is about on that par, but entirely out of place in a modern magazine. Sure, the Carlisle series was very popu-

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lar at the time they appeared, but the modern S-F reader regards this stuff as comic-book and television space-opera material. A reprint magazine can get away with publishing this stuff by calling it a classic from the golden age of S-F but a magazine in the classzine field will be laughed out of business for this type of slush.

"Silent Night": All this story does is retell the Yeats poem. Many excellent stories have been written *around* a poem, but in this case the tale contains nothing original out of the author's imagination.

"The Big Bluff"; Your cover blurb is a bit misleading. It (the story) was neither exciting or a novelette (too short). I was not impressed by the Earthman's solution of the problem.

"Gold is Anywhere": Fair.

"The Eye and I": Little originality either in plot or gimmick. . . .

"Killer in the Crib": Spread a little thin.

"The Still Waters": I liked it.

In summarizing, may I pass out orchids to Joy Hall and Virgil Finlay, onions to Chandler and Kemp, and one gallon of muscatel to Howard Browne?

Victor Paananen
1148 West 8th St.
Ashtabula, Ohio

● *Come in out of the rain, pal; you're all wet. We asked for opinions and we get them, but that doesn't mean we have to agree with them. People don't laugh a magazine out of business; it's when they get* bored *that the publication goes to the sheriff—as a good many "classzines" have discovered in the last year or so. And you're only stepping on your feet when in the same paragraph you refer to a story as a "classic of the golden age of S-F" and "this type of slush." It takes a good story to qualify as a classic; slush disappears with the summer sun.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

Was glad to see the letter column blooming again. I'm also overjoyed that *Amazing* is "reverting to type." To tell the truth, for a long time now I've been buying *Fantastic* only

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because I'm a completist. Things have changed now, I'm happy to say.

I haven't read the stories in the April issue yet. But I have the letter-writing bug, so I thought what th' heck. I can always write again. Will, too.

The cover's good, although not as good as some Valigursky's done. I chortled happily at the return of Finlay. In three stories, yet! The other illustrations were undistinguished, as usual. The stories all look good, if not outstanding.

Suppose that's about covered everything. For now. My congrats to you again, and the best of luck to *Fantastic*. Oh yes. Do you prefer the letters double-spaced, like this one?

Barry Gardner
Box 201
Deport, Texas

⊙ *Actually, we'd like to see all letters typed, double-spaced and with 60 characters, including spaces, to the line. But we've got to do* some *of the work around here, so all letters will be used—space permitting—no matter* how *they're written.—Ed.*

Dear Editor:

Have just finished reading the April issue of your magazine. I am a comparatively new adherent to the science-fiction school, having read but five of the issues of *Fantastic*, and equal numbers of others of the same general nature. Your letter page, when included, has always fascinated me and I finally think I have an excuse—legitimate—for an attempt at publication in it.

The April issue was superlatively good. The cover story, "The Eye and I" by C. H. Thames, was as fine a story as I have yet read in any science-fiction magazine. The thought inspired by that story alone would make a race of philosophers of us. My personal congratulations to the author for a new and different ending.

Another story exceptionally good was "Gold is Anywhere" by Henry Still. He has made a go of a type of story already becoming trite, even in my short experience: the super-race of insects.

"Death Has Strong Hands" by Lawrence Chandler, despite

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that author's well-deserved fame in this field, was a flop. It reminds me of any one of several dozen film "westerns": boy and girl go into a situation disliking each other, come out in a marrying mood.

The best of the inspirational crop of the season was Lysander Kemp's "Silent Night." Short, but very well written, it was highly effective.

This issue seems full of inspirational stories. "The Still Waters" by Joy Hall was definitely better than average, but suffers in comparison to "Silent Night." The theme of the freezing world is becoming a little over-used, don't you think?

"Killer in the Crib" by Richard Wilson, although not the type of story I usually like, was excellently written and obviously well thought out. The conclusion was a little too predictable, but so are most of them in these bits. Credit due for a new idea.

"The Big Bluff" by Milton Lesser, deserves and will undoubtedly get all kinds of kudos. The man must be a psychologist, at least. That's the kind of story that starts you thinking along the "What would I do if—" line.

So much for the magazine. Congratulations on an excellent issue. I would like to know if Fletcher Pratt is writing anything currently. Aside from being one of our era's best historians, he is one damn fine science-fiction author. It might be that he has something that would fit in one of your future issues. I would like to see it, if such is the case.

If permitted, I would like to make a suggestion. One gets a bit wearied of the continual and unchanging general nature of the currently published science fiction. We are always off on a galactic war, or exploring some alien planet, or something of similar nature, always many, many light-years from home. As an enjoyable interlude, say in every other issue, something on the style and nature of Robert Bloch's story "Mr. Margate's Mermaid." A little more of this could mean a much less stilted general opinion of science fiction and provide diversion for readers at the same time.

Jamie H. King, Jr.
217 Linden Avenue
Ithaca, New York

● *Your remarks on the stories in the April issue were*

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interesting and cogent. We expect to continue presenting exciting stories that entertain. . . . At present, we have no material by Fletcher Pratt, although we assume he is still writing. . . . We're running many stories in which the action takes place right here on Earth, although fantasy subjects are held pretty much to a minimum.—Ed.

Dear Editor:

I've always been content to sit on the sidelines and read what the other person has to say in the letters section. I feel that it is high time I expressed my own opinion.

After having read *Fantastic* for a considerable length of time, and having just finished the April issue, I would like to say that you present a varied and interesting assortment of stories. I especially liked "The Eye and I" and "Still Waters." They combined fine plots and characters into interesting pieces of narrative. Naturally there are some stories I would consider uninteresting and dull, but I'm quite sure that everyone possesses a different taste and that you try to satisfy them all, which is why I feel that your magazine is a fine collection of stories.

Also, I would like to say that your illustrations are extremely well done and show realism with a touch of imagination, making the reader take more than a passing glance.

Bob Qudeen
c/o Boston College
Newtonville, Mass.

◉ *Letters from readers who seldom, if ever, write to editors are doubly welcome. Too many finish an issue, say "Great bunch of stories!" or "So, I wasted 35¢, but some blonde woulda got it anyway!"—and let it go at that. It would help a lot if they'd say it on paper and send it to the editor—whose only contact with readers is through the mails.—Ed.*

ANNOUNCING A NEW CONTEST . . .

For the best letter (and we *don't* mean a listing of stories in the order of their merit) used in this department each issue, the editors will send the original of one of the illustrations from *Fantastic*. The opinion of the judges is final, and duplicate prizes will be awarded in case of ties.—Ed.

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 (Concluded from page 5)

sharp dialogue or effective handling of mood. Most of the writers named can handle all those ingredients—and handle them exceptionally well. But those things are the mechanics of good story-telling, and can be learned in the same way that algebra or French cooking can be learned. It is beyond the brick and plaster of story construction that the author as a person takes over; what he is intellectually and morally—his beliefs and interpretations; his perception or lack of it; his love or contempt for, or indifference to, his fellow man; his ideals and sensitivity and compassion, if any. In the field of literature—as in any art form—it is the presence, or absence, of these factors in an author's work which enables us to evaluate truly his position in his field.

All this is fine and necessary, but in the writing of fiction it is not enough. The *story* must be there: characters in conflict. Yet action and thrills and time-travel alone are no more than icing on the cake: they please the taste-buds and fatten you up . . . and do nothing to build the bones or sharpen the mind. It is not belaboring the metaphor to say that a cake without icing can be as flat as Kansas, or that a diet of icing alone can give you a belly ache.

Ideally, every experience should leave you wiser, richer, stronger. Anything you read is an experience. The written word can do that for you—just as it can weaken and impoverish and stupefy. The philosophy of Nietzsche has wrecked more lives than the Black Plague; the words of St. Thomas Aquinas are as healing as penicillin.

Just where does Ray Bradbury fit into all this? Far, far down the scale of authors who have molded the lives and thinking of mankind. Our original remark, if you'll recall, was about his position in science fiction. With full respect to all concerned, we submit that such stories by Bradbury as "Sun and Shadow," from the March 17, 1953, issue of *The Reporter;* "And the Rock Cried Out," from *Fahrenheit 451;* "The Concrete Mixer," from *The Illustrated Man*—stand at ionospheric heights compared with the best of, say, Sturgeon or Heinlein.

To sum up: there are a number of excellent story-tellers in science fiction. Bradbury is one of them—but more than that, he is rewarding to read on a level *beyond* pure entertainment. Here he is the most gifted author in science fiction.—HB

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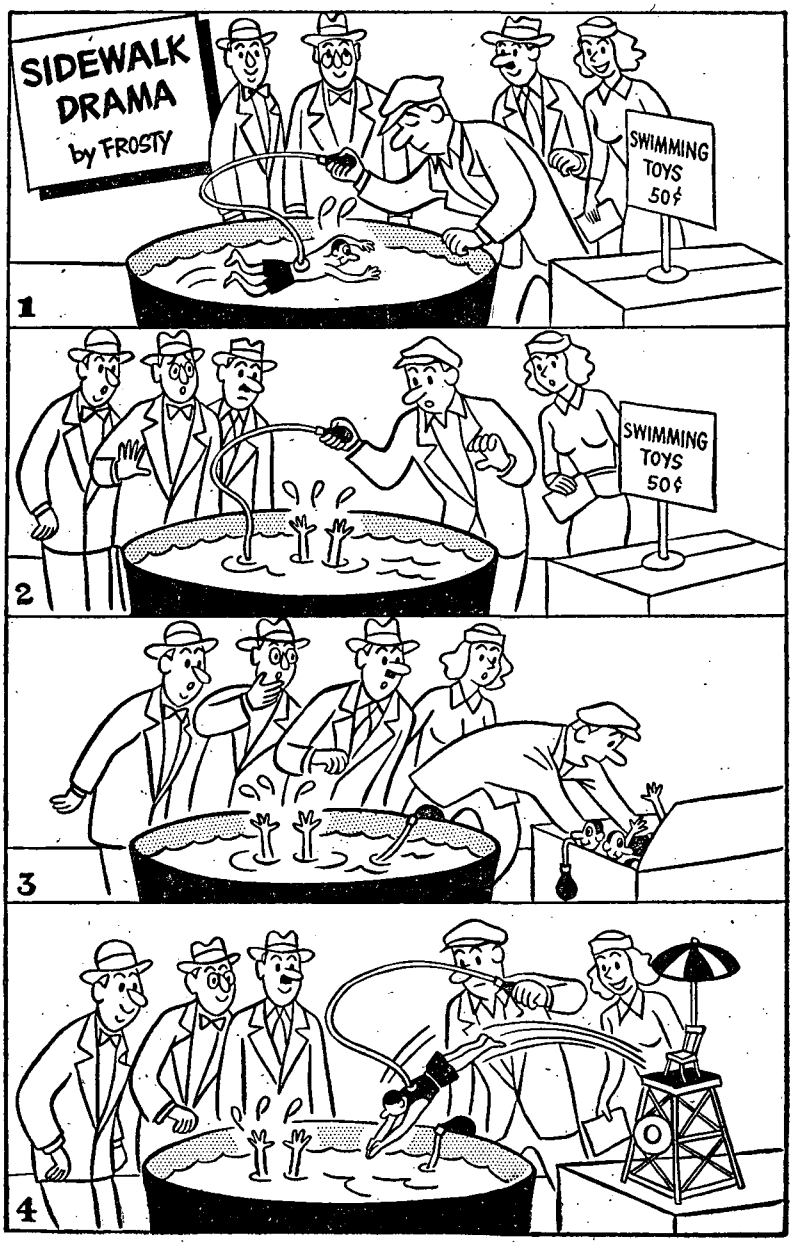

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